Spiritual Essay

# BEFORE THE FACE OF CHRIST

## Thérèse of Lisieux and Two Interpreters

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SAINT THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX died of tuberculosis just one hundred years ago, on 30 September 1897, at the age of twenty-four. Veneration of her, assisted by the publication of her autobiography and by the energetic support of her sisters, spread rapidly. Pope Pius XI beatified her in 1923 and canonized her two years later. He saw her as the 'star of his pontificate'. Pope Pius X is said to have called her the 'greatest saint of modern times'. There are many fascinating questions about her life and subsequent veneration, and a vast and growing literature. In this article I will concentrate on her life and sayings, and on two theological interpretations of her life, those of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Ida Görres. The particular theme I want to address is the face – the face of Christ and the face of Thérèse. The question I am asking is about the formation of the self before the face of Christ.

Let us begin with the genesis of Görres' study. It shows a recognition of the explosive significance of the face, including its subversive potential:

> During a meeting at Burg Rothenfels, then the centre of the Catholic Youth Movement in Germany, a student showed me a small picture, like a passport photograph. 'This is the true appearance of Little Thérèse,' he said. 'Dom Willibord Verkade, the monk-painter of Beuron, discovered and published it. The Carmel at Lisieux, and a French bishop as well, protested vehemently against its publication.'
>
> A small group of young people gathered round him; the picture passed from hand to hand. In stunned silence we gazed at the familiar and yet so alien features, and someone said: '. . . Almost like the face of a female Christ'. From that August morning on I was determined to pursue the riddle of her look and her smile – so different from the honeyed insipidity of the usual representation of her. Who was Thérèse of the Child Jesus in reality?[1]

*Names and faces*

Thérèse Martin was born in Alençon in France in 1873, the youngest of five sisters in an extremely devout Catholic family. Her mother died when she was five and the family moved to Lisieux. Her two older sisters entered the Carmelite convent in Lisieux, and when she was fifteen Thérèse did so too, later to be followed there by yet another sister. She became novice mistress, and, on the instructions of her sister Pauline, she wrote the story of her life, published in English as *Story of a soul*.[2]

Thérèse had two 'names in religion'. The first was 'of the child Jesus', which was given to her on her entry into the convent. The other, 'of the Holy Face', she chose for herself when she received the veil at the age of sixteen. As Görres shows, the roots of her desire for this name are deep and multiple. Her sister Pauline had introduced her to it, and it had been a special devotion of the founder of the Lisieux Carmel, Mother Geneviève, who placed an image of the 'Veil of Veronica' in the chapel of the convent.

A further powerful impetus was given by the illness of her father, to whom she was extraordinarily close, shortly after she entered the convent. The face of the person she loved most on earth was now transformed into the frightful mask of living death. There was also the memory of a mysterious vision in her childhood, in which she had seen her father walking in the garden with covered head. With the obsessiveness of grief she pondered on how this could have happened to so faithful a servant of God. Combined with all this was her own experience of God turning away from her, which was given form and significance in her mind by Christ's 'bleeding Head, so wounded'. Six weeks before her death she remarked to Pauline: 'The words in Isaiah: "No stateliness here, no majesty, no beauty, as we gaze upon him, to win our hearts" . . . – these words were the basis of my whole worship of the Holy Face'.[3]

Thérèse was not given to extraordinary experiences and was suspicious of mystical phenomena, but the theme of facing is central to those she does speak of. When she was seriously ill, aged ten, she prays before a statue of Mary:

> 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* . . . It was her *countenance alone* that had struck me.[4]

As she entered upon years of spiritual aridity, during the retreat before her profession she prays in classic Carmelite imagery to reach 'the summit of the mountain of love'. Instead, 'Our Lord took me by the hand and made me enter a subterranean way . . . a tunnel where I see nothing but a half-veiled glow from the downcast eyes of the Face of my Spouse.'[5] In May of the year before she died, as her aridity intensified, she had a dream:

> I saw three Carmelites, dressed in their mantles and long veils . . . In the depths of my heart I cried out: 'Oh! how happy I would be if I could see the face of one of these Carmelites!' Then, as though my prayer were heard by her, the tallest of the saints advanced towards me: immediately I fell to my knees. Oh! what happiness! The Carmelite *raised her veil or rather she raised it and covered me with it* . . . No ray escaped from it and still, in spite of the veil which covered us both, I saw this heavenly face suffused with an unspeakably gentle

> light . . . I cannot express the joy of my soul since these things are experienced but cannot be put into words.[6]

Such experiences, together with a very close and affectionate family life in which expressions were registered with great sensitivity, followed by a convent life in which nuns had long periods of silence but observed each other with great precision, made the theme of facing a constant and fruitful image. As von Balthasar comments:

> Her whole life in Christ is concentrated into her devotion to the Holy Face; unwaveringly she gazes upon God in the extremity of his love, gazing on his face where the eternal light seems to have been extinguished and yet is most transparent, streaming irresistibly from beneath the closed lids . . . The Holy Face . . . is for her the direct revelation and vision of the divine countenance . . . Thérèse is never tired of returning to the 'eyes which fascinate her', of 'Him whose Face was hidden so that men knew him not', of 'the loved unknown Countenance which ravishes us with its tears'. She gazes entranced upon those downcast eyes; everything is centred there.[7]

The face of Jesus becomes for Thérèse a way into the basic truths of faith. She sees God delighting to look upon his children, but not in a way that makes them self-conscious. The effect is to focus them on another, on Jesus alone, above all in his hiddenness and suffering. The Holy Face is above all a thread through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Jesus as a child; on the mountain of the transfiguration; being anointed by Mary Magdalene; weeping in Gethsemane; bloody and wearing the crown of thorns; resurrected and in heaven; and on the day of judgement: all are connected with his face.

*Practices of facing Christ*

The practices in which Thérèse's devotion to the face of Jesus Christ was expressed most obviously were those to do with worship, meditation, prayer and the liturgical year. She addressed the Holy Face in prayer, she wrote hymns and poems about it, she painted it on mass vestments and in pictures; she meditated on it and always had its pictures in her breviary and in her place in choir; when she was novice mistress she composed a form of consecration to the Holy Face for the novices to use; she specially celebrated the Feast of the Transfiguration on 6 August; and in her last illness she had its picture on the curtain of her bed so that she could always see it.[8]

What is distinctive about her devotion, however, is the way in which it becomes intrinsic to the way of life resulting in the teaching for which she is best known, her 'little way'. This she described as 'the way of spiritual childhood, the way of trust and total surrender. I wish to tell [people] that there is only one thing to do here below – to strew before Jesus the flowers of little sacrifices.' The little way means recognizing one's nothingness, expecting

everything from the good God 'as a little child expects from his father'. It means not attributing the virtues we practise to ourselves but recognizing that God places them there 'for Him to use as He needs them'. It means putting all our trust in the good God 'who alone can sanctify our work'.[9] The little way is a way of trust in the overwhelming generosity of God at every moment. This involves being constantly alert for ways of pleasing God by sacrificial love, little acts which are like petals strewn before Jesus. There can be no reckoning up of what we achieve like this, since we recognize that we owe it all to God. Whatever the sacrifice, God has grace enough for it.

In a famous passage in her autobiography Thérèse describes her recognition of her vocation. She was overwhelmed by 'infinite desires' and longed to serve Jesus by being Carmelite, spouse, mother, warrior, priest, apostle, doctor, martyr, crusader, papal guard, prophet. She meditated on 1 Corinthians 13 on love as the excellent way:

> I finally had rest. Considering the mystical body of the Church, I had not recognised myself in any of the members described by St Paul, or rather I desired to see myself in them *all*. Charity gave me the key to my vocation. I understood that if the Church had a body composed of different members, the most necessary and most notable of all could not be lacking to it, and so I understood that the Church *had a heart and that this heart was burning with love. I understood that it was love alone* that made the Church's members act, that if *love* ever became extinct, apostles would not preach the Gospels and martyrs would not shed their blood . . . 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!'[10]

Thérèse goes on to meditate on why this is a little way. She is a little child who 'knows only one thing: to love You, O Jesus'. Astounding works are forbidden to her. In the metaphors of flowers, petals, scents and singing she points to the practices that are at the heart of her vocation. They amount to a double discipline. On the one hand, there is her devotion to the hidden, despised face of Christ. Her experience of this was through a faith that was largely devoid of consolation year after year in the convent. Görres chronicles this vividly, building up from hints and details a picture of devastating spiritual aridity, reaching a crescendo of intensity during her final illness. On the other hand, there is her conduct with her sisters in the convent. Her 'special note' as a saint is 'the veil of the smile'.[11] She took literally the Sermon on the Mount's instructions not to allow a discipline that involves suffering to be revealed in the face.[12] Self-denials and sacrifices for the sake of others were concealed in her smile. Forty years after her death the surviving nuns from the convent always spoke first of her beautiful, radiant smile. She also had a fine sense of humour and regularly made the nuns laugh at recreation.

*Smiling, responsibility and joy*

This poses a special historical problem because by definition such a practice was only authentic if it remained hidden. How can it emerge so strongly? Partly because she was ordered to write her autobiography and took obedience very seriously; partly because she was subjected to a comprehensive interrogation by her sisters and others, especially during her final illness.

Her smile can easily be misunderstood. It could be seen as hypocritical, a pretence of happiness, or as a form of politeness which conceals. One cannot avoid twinges of uneasiness about her deliberately choosing friendship with those nuns she found most distasteful. But Görres' sensitive analysis is convincing: 'To Thérèse her smile was simply honest fulfilment of her vocation'.[13] Its theological basis is clear. On the one hand it springs from living before the face of Christ. She wants to smile for him and also to imitate his hiddenness. 'Beneath that smile she sacrificed things profound and valid: the basic human longing for recognition, for another's understanding look into one's own heart.'[14] On the other hand, it springs from the certainty that each person is made in the image of God. 'Young Thérèse set about mastering this hidden reality of God in her fellow human beings.'[15]

Encompassing both of these is her grasp of the 'new commandment', to love one another as Christ has loved us. In Chapter 10 of *Story of a soul* she repeatedly returns to the Sermon on the Mount in order to interpret that commandment, giving her own interpretations and weaving into her meditation examples of her practice of smiling. Smiling might appear a somewhat precious and even trivial discipline in the light of the problems of the world. Yet Thérèse gave her reason for entering the convent as 'to save souls and above all to pray for priests'.[16] The two sides of that declaration are closely linked, since she saw priesthood as primarily about the salvation of souls. But what is this salvation?

Thérèse is clear that saving souls is about love. She writes to her sister Céline that the 'one thing' is 'to love, to love Jesus with all the power of our hearts, and to save souls for him, so that he will be loved still more'.[17] But her way was not that of 'great deeds' like those of the 'great saints'. Rather it relied on God's delight in his 'little ones' even when they can do very little: they do their little out of love for him and he does all they ask. She says to God: '. . . I am but a poor little thing who would return to nothingness if your divine glance did not give me life from one moment to the next'.[18] The utter reliance upon God intensified during her final illness: 'We experience such great peace in being absolutely poor, in being able to count on nothing but God'.[19] Even the sacraments were relativized. 'Undoubtedly it is a great grace to receive the sacraments, but if God does not permit it, that is well too . . . All is grace.'[20]

Yet the 'all is grace' is not at all competitive with human responsibility. Thérèse was fascinated by the relationship of grace, obedience and works, and her actions and teachings frequently show her transcending the usual dilemmas. For example, she writes to Céline: 'Jesus has so incomprehensible,

so uncompromising a love for us, that He wants to do nothing without us; he wants us to share with him in the salvation of souls'.[21] That 'nothing without us' is the mysterious, 'uncompromising' gift of responsibility. Indeed the responsibility is all the more radical because of the one who gives it, and it is pictured in one of her favourite images: Jesus asleep, either as a baby or in the boat in the storm on the sea of Galilee.[22] For Jesus to sleep means that one is still responsible before his face,[23] but must take responsibility for what one does without him saying or doing anything. This rather 'cute' image conceals years in which she experienced no consolations that might be interpreted as his smiles. She maintains in faith her love of him, and prays and works for herself and others to give him joy.

Joy is a frequent topic in what she says and writes. It is radically oriented towards others and is essentially joy in the joy of others. This is first of all the joy of Jesus and of his Father, but inseparable from it is the joy in the joy of other people, above all in their love of each other and of God. This is 'substitutionary joy' inseparable from substitutionary responsibility. It is therefore a joy which does not exclude suffering; on the contrary, it even rejoices in suffering for God and others. Thérèse's embracing of suffering with joy can seem scandalous to the point of being masochistic if taken out of context. Hers is always a desire for the beatitude of the other – the way for 'little saints'. And she longs for ordinary people to accomplish it. This is no heroic altruism, but a way for the weak, for those who identify with Thérèse as a little child trusting utterly in God and not worrying unduly about whether or not she has made a great impact. Her attractiveness is partly in her opening a way of sanctification at the heart of ordinary life, where most of the sacrifices appear 'little' but are, before God, the ways that love is multiplied and souls are shaped.

This little way is small enough to fit into every vocation every day, and the ultimate simplicity of its desire to suffer for love and rejoice through love is in its constant orientation to the face of Christ. Jesus smiles on love for God and neighbour, and incarnates both. The 'detour' of desire by way of the face of Christ brings Thérèse back to other neighbours. Her way of helping to save souls is therefore to take on the joyful responsibility of trying to love them so as to open up for them the way of joyful responsibility before God. It is an imitable 'little way' which yet demands everything of whoever travels it.

*Thérèse, theology and saintliness*

Two of Thérèse's major theological biographers, Görres and von Balthasar, give different yet complementary commentaries. They were both writing before the recent scholarly work on the manuscripts which has generated much controversy about the extent of the editing and altering of Thérèse's conversations and writings.[24] Yet my reading of Jean-François Six's study is that it does not materially affect the key issues between Görres and von Balthasar. Those issues are partly a matter of the genre on which each is writing. Von Balthasar is giving a theological interpretation of Thérèse which

is concerned to place her in relation to doctrines, the celibate and married 'states of life', the official ministry of the Catholic Church, patterns of holiness and traditions of mysticism. He often finds her wanting in some of these respects: very little emphasis on the Holy Spirit in the Trinity, a defective interpretation of original sin, little contact with the 'objective' ministry of the Church, less than full immersion in the 'dark night of the soul'. Görres, on the other hand, is primarily telling a story, though with a thorough awareness of the theological issues. In comparing them it is striking how much detail von Balthasar leaves out and how profoundly this affects the portrayal of Thérèse. The form that Görres uses seems more adequate to the content. She is describing a 'micro-drama' of nuanced facings, apparently tiny decisions, hints of what is largely hidden, complex ambiguities which defy overview.

Von Balthasar's verdict on Görres is that she is too influenced by 'German personalism' and depth psychology.[25] He concludes that 'This leads to obvious misinterpretations, so that in spite of her brilliant account of Thérèse's personal life and milieu Görres' work is inadequate on the theological side'.[26] It is questionable whether such a judgement is adequate for Görres' patient and illuminating attention to the details of a life. Setting this aside, the heart of the verdict is that she fails to use von Balthasar's own key distinction between person and mission. In his other writings he has offered a typology of sainthood integrated with his doctrine of the Church, and his *Theodrama* explains at great length his concept of mission in relation to person. His theological net is cast as wide as possible and he delivers, together with much affirmation, a series of negative judgements on both Thérèse and Görres.

The problem is that the mesh of his net seems too large to catch the littleness of Thérèse and the theological significance of Görres' portrayal. Von Balthasar's construct of saintliness is deeply influenced by Hegel's notion of 'world-historical individuals' and his drama embraces the whole history of God with the world. Within that the key to the drama is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the context of Israel and the Church. He has a lively appreciation of the dramatic roles of saints and of the varied ways in which person and mission can come together. The problem in relation to Thérèse comes when he assumes something like an overview of the drama, judging her performance according to his own criteria.

It is not that it is inappropriate to make judgements – Görres too does so and by no means so as always to portray Thérèse as a 'heroine'. But whereas she travels a lengthy 'detour through the details' in order to arrive there, von Balthasar tends to impose his categories and use the details as illustrations. In spite of his eloquent recognition of the centrality of Thérèse facing the Holy Face at the heart of her mission and vocation of love, this is subsumed into his own systematic approach. Görres' method allows her to stay before Thérèse's face and to transform her own categories accordingly. Von Balthasar criticizes Görres for failing to distinguish person and mission. Görres' response might be that in Thérèse's vocation of love embodied in practices of facing there is

an undercutting of that distinction. It does not mean that the distinction is useless, but, applied to the person and her mission of largely hidden ordinariness, it is simply not illuminating. Thérèse's own account of the discovery of her vocation implies as much: her yearning for the more 'heroic' missions or vocations is overwhelmed by her realization that her own is more radical than any – and a presupposition of them all.

*Thérèse's dying*

The culminating difference between Görres and von Balthasar comes in their interpretations of Thérèse's death. Von Balthasar's verdict is that:

> Thérèse's world remains immune from the effects of elemental evil – a fact which confirms our opinion that her night of the soul never reached the dimensions of the night of the Cross, that point where the Son is brought face to face with the sinner's absolute abandonment by God. In a sense Thérèse's little way leaves her at the beginning of the Passion; it confines her to the Mount of Olives.[27]

Görres gives a different verdict: 'She was participating in the unfathomable Passion of Our Lord when his Father abandoned him'.[28] Her dying was, in the convent setting, public and exposed – she was endlessly interrogated by the nuns, her words recorded. There was a continuing experience which Görres seems right to describe in terms of abandonment by God in the face of suffering, sin, evil, death and the demonic. Above all there was the sheer physical pain, the disintegration of her body and the accompanying threat to her sanity, as she had seen happen to her father.

Von Balthasar has a continuing doubt about whether she really appreciated the depth of sin and evil, but even he acknowledges the strong statements during her final illness about contrition, forgiveness of debts and being a sinner. Görres goes further and suggests that alongside this sense of utter dependence on the forgiveness and mercy of God, in her last days Thérèse experienced a kind of judgement upon her past life and upon the testimony she had written. It was a conviction of the truth of what she had embodied and taught. Thérèse's suffering has more than a little of the scandal of the cross: the claim is stupendous, and Görres explores well the stark alternative between, on the one hand, judging this as humble recognition of what God has done through her and, on the other, an extraordinary assertion of self-importance.

The self of Thérèse is perhaps most adequately understood as formed through a lifetime of facing Jesus Christ in faith. For her he is the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 and the hidden, crucified one. The resurrection is not allowed to overcome the hiddenness, and the implications for responsibility are embraced in her devotion to the sleeping face of Jesus. Thérèse certainly does not stop short at the agonized face in Gethsemane. In her final illness, as interpreted by Görres, she faces death by trusting the crucified Jesus – her final

act of being for others and for God. If this is, as has been suggested, a spirituality for the third millennium, its secret perhaps lies in the simplicity of this compassionate face turned to each human face and able to inspire the endless complexities of joyful responsibility.

## NOTES

[1] Ida Görres, *The hidden face* (London: Burns and Oates, 1959), p 13. Referred to hereafter as *Face*.
[2] The edition I refer to is *Story of a soul: the autobiography of St Thérèse of Lisieux* (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1976), referred to hereafter as *Story*.
[3] *Face*, pp 260f.
[4] *Story*, pp 65–67.
[5] *Face*, pp 260f; quoting from Letter 91.
[6] *Story*, pp 191f.
[7] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Thérèse of Lisieux: the story of a mission* (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1953), pp 157–159. Referred to hereafter as *Mission*.
[8] *Mission*, pp 157ff.
[9] *Story*, pp 20f.
[10] *Story*, p 194.
[11] *Face*, p 112.
[12] Matthew 6:16–18.
[13] *Face*, p 308.
[14] *Face*, p 311.
[15] *Face*, p 239.
[16] *Face*, p 139.
[17] *Story*, p 287.
[18] Quoted and discussed in Jean-François Six, *Light of the night: the last eighteen months in the life of Thérèse of Lisieux* (London: SCM, 1996), p 87.
[19] *Face*, p 373.
[20] *Face*, p 378.
[21] *Face*, p 288.
[22] *Mission*, pp 216ff.
[23] 'How entrancing is your smile as you sleep!' in *Mission*, p 217.
[24] See especially Jean-François Six, *Light of the night*, which is extremely critical of the role played by Thérèse's sister Pauline, Mother Agnes.
[25] *Mission*, p 276.
[26] *Mission*, p 277.
[27] *Mission*, p 271.
[28] *Face*, p 359.