



Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus

Painting "Saint Therese and Saint Theophane Venard"

Located in Shrine Church.

Artist: Neilson Carlin

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Father Jacques Marie]

"What do you ask of the Church of God?" - "Faith."

This dialogue which opens the Baptismal liturgy for an adult, continues with this question of the priest: "What does the faith give you?" - "Eternal life," answers the catechumen. Indeed, "Faith makes us taste in advance the light of the beatific vision, the goal of our journey here below. Then we shall see God *face to face* (1 Cor 13:12), *as He is* (1 Jn 3: 2)" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, CCC, 163*).

Nowadays, the virtue of faith is most often misunderstood, reduced to a mere subjective feeling or a vague religious belief, considered as a free or optional opinion. It would be nothing more than a private, personal conviction with which no one is concerned, especially not the Church.

Take or leave ?

But what actually is faith? Faith is the theological virtue, by which we believe in God and in all that He has said and revealed, and which the Holy Church teaches us, because He is the Truth Itself. By means of His Revelation, God, who is invisible, addresses Himself to men as to His friends and converses with them in order to invite them to be united with Himself. Through faith, man totally submits His intelligence and will to God who reveals Himself (cf. CCC, 1814, 142-143).

Far from being optional, the faith is necessary for eternal salvation. Jesus Christ clearly affirmed this: *He that believeth and is baptized, shall be saved* (Mk 16: 16). "Since *without faith it is impossible to please [God]* (Heb 11: 6) and to attain to the fellowship of His sons, therefore without faith no one has ever attained justification, nor will anyone obtain eternal life *but he who endures to the end* (Mt 10: 22)" (CCC, 161). To refuse the faith, which is a gift of God, means to refuse salvation, and be lost for eternity: *He that believeth not, shall be condemned* (Mk 16: 16). The faith therefore cannot be an optional "take it or leave it."

Far from being accessory or without importance, faith has a profound repercussion on the entire Christian life: *The just man liveth by faith* (Rom 1: 17). This year the Church is celebrating the centenary of Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus' entrance into Heaven. She whom Saint Pius X called "the greatest saint of modern times," showed forth the power of faith in a very simple life. She was hardly four years old when she was questioned by her sister Céline who was puzzled by the mystery of the Holy Eucharist: "How is it that the Good Lord can be in such a small Host?" asked Céline. - "It's not surprising," retorted Thérèse, "since God is almighty." - "What does 'almighty' mean?" - "It means He can do whatever He wants!" Admirable logic of a child's faith.

But, is this child's faith in accordance with reason? Yes, for it is reasonable to believe. Believing is an authentically human act. Having trust in God and adhering to the truths He has revealed is contrary neither to the freedom nor to the intelligence of man. Even in our everyday contacts, it is not contrary to our dignity to believe what other people tell us of themselves and their intentions, nor to trust their promises. However, inasmuch as it is a personal adherence to God and assent to the truth He has revealed, Christian faith differs from faith in a human person. It is just and right to confide totally in God and believe absolutely all that He has said. It would be vain and false to put the same faith in a creature (cf. CCC, 150). "If we do not believe God," notes Saint Ambrose, "who will we believe?"

Blind sentiment

Revealed truths may seem obscure for human reason and experience. Faith does not eliminate mysteries, but it allows us to adhere to them with certainty, putting our confidence in God "who cannot deceive nor be deceived." "Faith is certain. It is more certain than all human knowledge because it is founded on the very word of God who cannot lie" (CCC, 157).

However, faith is not a blind and purely subjective sentiment without any foundation on reason. On the contrary, "so that the submission of our faith might nevertheless be in accordance with reason, God willed that external proofs of His Revelation should be joined to the internal helps of the Holy Spirit. Thus the miracles of Christ and the saints, prophecies, the Church's growth and holiness, and her fruitfulness and stability are the most certain signs of divine Revelation, adapted to the intelligence of all; they are motives of credibility (*motiva credibilitatis*), which show that the assent of faith is by no means a blind impulse of the mind" (CCC, 156). In our age of skepticism and relativism, in which all religions are presented as equivalents, it is important to study with care the "external proofs of Revelation," and to know well why we believe¹.

"What kind of a thought is that?"

Enlightened by faith, Saint Thérèse lived in familiarity with the invisible world: God, the saints and the angels were as close to her as her father, mother and sisters. One day, when she was not yet three years old, wishing to show her mother the depth of her love, she said to her: "Oh! How I would like you to die, my poor little Mother!"-"Now, Thérèse, what kind of a thought is that? You should not say such things!"-"But it's so you will go to Heaven, since you say we have to die to go there!" For Thérèse, Heaven is a reality. Here, in Alençon, there are Daddy, Mommy, and her sisters. In Le Mans, there is her religious aunt. In Lisieux, there are her uncle and aunt Guérin. And in Heaven, there are her four little brothers and sisters who died babies. Why couldn't Thérèse wish Heaven for those she loved the most in this world? This is all very simple. Later, when asked, "How is it that you are able to think always of God?" Thérèse answered: "It's not difficult we think naturally of someone we love!" *Where thy treasure is, there is thy heart also (Mt 6: 21).*

The grace of faith, received at Baptism, found favorable ground in the saint's family. Mr. and Mrs. Martin were fully conscious of their role as Christian parents and, with God's help, they placed everything in the light of the Gospel. "Through the grace of the sacrament of marriage, parents receive the responsibility and privilege of evangelizing their children. Parents should

initiate their children at an early age into the mysteries of the faith of which they are the first heralds for their children. They should associate them from their tenderest years with the life of the Church. A wholesome family life can foster interior dispositions that are a genuine preparation for a living faith and remain a support for it throughout one's life. Family catechesis precedes, accompanies, and enriches other forms of instruction in the faith. Parents have the mission of teaching their children to pray and to discover their vocation as children of God" (CCC, 2225-2226).

The faith revealed to Saint Thérèse God's paternity and His merciful love. "The Lord has always been compassionate and full of sweetness toward me—slow to punish and rich in mercy," she wrote toward the end of her life. "To me He has given His infinite Mercy, and through it I contemplate His other divine perfections! Then, they all appear to me shining with love; even His justice (and maybe even more than all the others) seems to me clothed with love." She understood that weakness, powerlessness, sin itself, as long as we regret it, far from being an obstacle to God's mercy, induce it and draw it: "Yes, I feel that even if I had on my conscience all the sins that can be committed, I would go, my heart broken with repentance, and throw myself into Jesus' arms, for I know how much He cherishes the prodigal son who comes back to Him. I feel that this multitude of offenses would be like a drop of water cast into a fiery blaze."

While turning away His head

Through lively faith, the saint discovered the mercy of God even in the midst of suffering. God's plan was clear to her: to make the consequences of sin serve not only for man's salvation, but also for his perfection, even unto sanctity. Thérèse found the secret of holiness in suffering, seen as the means of going out of oneself to be united with God, in other words, a means of love. For nothing pleases God more than our obedience, which is manifested by our acceptance of suffering. Left to man after his sin, suffering has been sanctified by the Passion of Christ. Trials are, in Saint Thérèse's eyes, the means of giving to God "a better witness of abandonment and love"; she wrote: "Under the winepress of suffering, I will prove my love to You."

But, "how is it, that God who loves us, can be happy when we suffer?" she asks herself. And her love dictates the answer: "No, our suffering never makes Him happy, but this suffering is necessary for us. So, He allows it while turning away His head." Sin having made suffering necessary, God wills it, but out of love, since it is the means to bring man to love Him. Bitter remedy, but, given man's egoism, necessary remedy for the soul's health and happiness. "It costs God to make us drink at the fountain of tears," wrote the saint; "but He knows that it is the only way to prepare us to know Him as He knows Himself and become gods ourselves! "

"You must make it known"

In fact, suffering left its mark on each stage of Saint Thérèse's life. She admits, "I have suffered much here below; you must make it known." This avowal makes her close to all those who meet with trials. At four years of age, she lost her mother who died after a long and painful cancer. "Beginning with Mom's death," she wrote later, "my gleeful character changed completely; I who was so lively, so expansive, I became timid and meek, overly sensitive. A look was enough to make me break out into tears; for me to be happy, I couldn't tolerate people looking after me; I

could not take the company of unknown people and I could find cheerfulness only in the intimacy of my family."

When she was eight, her sister Pauline, whom she had chosen to be her "second Mom," entered the Carmelite convent in Lisieux. On that day, tears flowed abundantly. "Since I am writing the story of my soul, I must tell everything, and I avow that the sufferings which preceded her entry were nothing compared to those which followed." She fell ill with a strange nervous illness. Due to the alarming extent of the illness, Mr. Martin thought his "little daughter was going to go crazy or die." An intervention of the Blessed Virgin was necessary to bring her back to health. However, the cure did not put an end to Saint Thérèse's pains. She wrote: "For a long time after my cure, I believed I had been sick on purpose and this was a real martyrdom for my soul. The Good Lord left me with this intimate martyrdom until the day I entered Carmel."

Hardly a year after Thérèse entered the convent, Mr. Martin, struck with mental illness, had to be confined in the psychiatric hospital of Bon-Sauveur in Caen. He would spend three long years there. "Just as the sorrows of Jesus pierced the heart of His Divine Mother with a sword," wrote the saint, "so our hearts felt the sufferings of him whom we cherished most fondly on this earth. I remember that in June 1888, at the time of our first trials, I said: 'I feel that I can take still greater trials.' I was unaware that one month after my investiture, our dear father would drink the most bitter, the most humiliating of all cups. Ah! on that day, I did not say I could suffer any more!!!" Saint Thérèse's confidence was nevertheless unshaken. She looked positively on this bitter cup. With a look of faith, she would later write: "One day, in Heaven, we will love to speak of our glorious trials. Yes, the three years of Dad's martyrdom seem to me to be the most lovable, the most fruitful of our whole life; I would not give them in exchange for all the ecstasies, all the revelations of the saints; my heart overflows when I think of this inestimable treasure." Her attraction for suffering did not diminish. "Dryness was my daily bread; deprived of every consolation, I was still the happiest of creatures, since all my desires were satisfied." One of her desires was to offer her trials for the salvation of sinners: "I was burning with the desire to draw them away from the eternal flames." But, "only suffering can give birth to souls," she wrote. By uniting herself thus to the Passion of Jesus, the saint knew how to take part in the work of Redemption, within the setting of her contemplative life. "Cloistered religious offer themselves with Jesus for the salvation of the world. As an expression of the pure love which is worth more than every action, contemplative life possesses an extraordinary apostolic and missionary efficacy" (John Paul II, *Vita consecrata*, March 25, 1996, no. 59).

"Show how imitable she is"

After her entry into the Carmelite convent on April 9, 1888, Saint Thérèse no longer tasted God's presence, which she previously had found so sweet. Prayer became difficult. "Reciting the Rosary costs me more than using an instrument of penance," she wrote. "I feel I say it so bad; in vain do I strive to meditate on the mysteries of the Rosary; I am unable to fix my attention. For a long time I was sad because of this lack of devotion which surprised me, for I love the Blessed Virgin so much that it should be easy for me to say in her honor prayers which please her so much. Now, it saddens me less; I think that the Queen of Heaven being my Mother, she must see my good will and be content with it."

Saint Thérèse also experienced weariness: "Yes, life costs; it is hard to begin a day of labor. If only we could feel Jesus, we would do everything for Him, but no, He seems to be a thousand leagues away, and we are alone with ourselves. But what then is this sweet Friend doing? Doesn't He see our anguish, the weight which oppresses us? Where is He, why doesn't He come to console us, since He is our only Friend?" Then she was reminded of these words of Jesus: *Be not solicitous for tomorrow; for the morrow will be solicitous for itself. Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof* (Mt 6: 34), and carrying her cross from day to day, she sang:

If I dream of tomorrow, inconstancy do I fear,

Sad and weary, my heart is in dismay.

But I do wish, my God, to suffer and to bear

Just for today!

Saint Thérèse's patience was exercised, almost always, by sufferings similar to the ones we all find on our way each day. Small, hidden sufferings which hurt us and which, if lively and loving faith are wanting, cause us to become disheartened, making us gloomy, a weight for ourselves and others. To carry these pains, Saint Thérèse had recourse, quite often, to the Most Blessed Virgin, her "Mom in Heaven": "She never fails to protect me as soon as I call upon her."

She found in Our Lady motherly comfort and a model of faith and love, in the midst of a very ordinary life. "How I would have liked to be a priest in order to preach about the Blessed Virgin! For a sermon about the Blessed Virgin to please me and do me some good, I must see her real life, not her supposed life; and I am sure her real life must have been very simple. Some people make her out to be inaccessible, whereas they should show how imitable she is, lay stress on her virtues, say that she lived by faith as we do, give proof of this from the Gospel, like when we read: *And they understood not the word that He spoke unto them* (Lk 2:50), and this other word which is no less mysterious: *His father and mother were wondering at those things which were spoken concerning Him* (Lk 2: 33). Such admiration supposes a certain astonishment."

Crown of glory

On April 2, 1896, during Holy Week, two spittings of blood revealed to Saint Thérèse that she had tuberculosis. With serenity, she considered her coming death: "It was as a sweet and distant murmur announcing the arrival of the Spouse." But, during the last year of her life, her soul was invaded by the thickest darkness, Heaven escaped from her sight, and strong temptations against faith assailed her. In this trial, she was conscious of partaking of the lot of unbelievers: "Jesus made me understand that there really are souls who do not have faith, who, through abuse of graces, lose this precious treasure, fountain of the only pure and true joys," she wrote. Out of love, she accepted this trial: "I tell Jesus that I am happy to not enjoy His beautiful Heaven on earth in order that He may open it for eternity to poor unbelievers." Her agony, on September 30, 1897, resembled that of Jesus, "without any mixture of consolation." But her last words express the victory of her faith and love: "Oh! I love Him My God, I love You!"

This passion opened for her the gate to Heaven and here below gave start to an unparalleled crown of glory! The little Carmelite would soon draw crowds. From everywhere, people came to

implore or thank the one who shed a veritable "Rain of Roses," temporal or spiritual graces which are the reward for her unshakable faith in Merciful Love. The word of Jesus: *Unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, itself remaineth alone. But if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit*" (Jn 12: 24: 25) was realized literally. On May 17, 1925, several hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from all over the world assisted at the triumphant glorification and canonization of Little Thérèse. And recently, Pope John Paul II did not hesitate to proclaim her Doctor of the Church! On October 19, the World Day for Missions, this exceptional honor came to increase the glory of the Patron Saint of Missions. The Church sees in her a beacon for the new evangelization.

Saint Thérèse had promised that she would "spend her Heaven doing good on earth." Let us ask her to communicate to us her lively faith and her unshakable confidence in Merciful Love. Our lives will thus be transformed and we will be led on the way to Heaven.

Let us beseech the new Doctor of the Church to intercede in a special manner for the new evangelization of our families as we prepare for Christmas and the Feast of the Holy Family. May the true peace of Christmas be with you and with all those dear to you, and may the souls of all your departed loved ones be received into the light and peace of the heavenly kingdom.

Dom Antoine Marie osb.

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