

St. Therese of Lisieux & the Fatherhood of God

A Simple Way to Understand the Little Way

Ever since she was young, Therese Martin wanted to become a saint ... but she wrote once: “Alas, I have always realized, when I compared myself to the saints, that there’s b/t them & me the same difference as exists b/t a mountain whose summit is lost in the heavens, & the obscure grain of sand trodden underfoot by passer-by”.

Therese saw holiness as a great mountain – impossible to reach, impossible to climb.

SLIDE 2

What’s the temptation when holiness seems unattainable? Well, for one, you could say: “Why even bother ... it’s for religious & priests, not for me”. The other temptation is **discouragement**: “I’ll never get there!”

St. Therese reacted differently. She said: “Instead of getting discouraged, I said to myself: ‘God could not inspire us w/ desires that were unrealizable ... so despite my littleness, I can aspire to holiness.’”

Therese desired to be a great saint ... *& where did that desire come from?* It came from the Lord. When you think about it, even the **natural desire to be loved** that we all have comes from Him too ... but He often plans on meeting or fulfilling our desires in ways that we don’t expect ... also, in supernatural ways ... b/c He really wants that desire to be fulfilled in our relationship w/ Him!

Question: Does anyone here really desire to be a saint? [raise hands] **Question:** You ever ask yourself where that desire comes from?

[pause] So, w/ St. Therese, who desired “holiness” ... in reality, she discovered that **it was b/c of her littleness** that she could aspire to holiness – not “in spite of” it ... b/c of it!

[pause] Her Little Way is a way of returning to evangelical simplicity – to the simplicity of the Gospel. She taught that, in order to be holy, it isn’t necessary to engage in a multiplicity of spiritual practices, perform rigorous penances & receive extraordinary graces – what’s needed, according to her, is to **acknowledge our weakness & our “nothingness” & to approach God w/ love & confidence ... & w/ a willingness to do His will.** (cfr. Jamart, *Complete SD*, 16)

Holiness for Therese – Overview of Her Little Way

Less than 2 months before she died, **St. Therese** was told one day by her sister Pauline: “You must have struggled very much to reach your degree of perfection.” Therese replied w/ what Pauline wrote was an “indefinable tone of voice”, & she said: “It’s not that at all. **Holiness** doesn’t consist in this or that practice. It consists in a disposition of the heart which makes us humble and little in God’s arms, conscious of our weakness and confident, even daringly confident, in the goodness of our Father.”
[repeat] (*Novissima Verba*, August 3, 1897)

☞ So Therese’s heroism was a different type of heroism ... a hidden heroism, a heroism of the ordinary, of the everyday ... it’s a heroism of the heart more than anything else.

A Simple Way to Understand the Little Way

- St. Therese one day announced to her novices: “If I lead you into error with my Little Way of Love, be not afraid that I shall permit you to follow it for any length of time. I would soon re-appear after my death and tell you to take another road. But if I do not return, believe me when I tell you that we never have too much confidence in the good Lord who is so powerful and merciful. We obtain from Him as much as we hope for.”
- In case you were wondering, St. Therese has not returned to correct her teaching. On the night between the 15th & 16th of January, 1910, she appeared to the Mother Prioress of the Carmel of Gallipoli and said to her: “My Way is sure!” On September 25, 1897, a few days before her death, she again confirmed it to Mother Agnes: “I now feel sure that all I have said and written is true.”
- “I feel that my mission is about to begin, my mission of making souls love the good Lord as I love Him, of giving my Little Way to souls! If my wishes are granted, my heaven will be spent on earth until the end of the world. Yes, I want to spend my heaven in doing good on earth. I shall not be able to rest until the end of the world, and as long as there are still souls to be saved; but, when the Angel shall have said ‘time is no more’ then will I rest. I shall then be able to rejoice because the number of the elect will be complete and all shall have entered into joy and repose. My heart leaps with gladness at this thought.”
- The following day, returning to the same thought, she declared: “God would not give me the desire of doing good on earth, if He didn’t intend to fulfill it. He would rather give me the desire of finding my repose in Him.” Soon after this, when someone read to her a passage that dealt with eternal beatitude, she remarked: “This is not the thing that attracts me, but love. To love, to be loved, and to return to earth to make Love loved.”

The Little Way in My Own Words

SLIDE 3

In my own “simplistic” way of understanding St. Therese’s teaching, I’d say that the Little Way has 3 main ingredients: **Knowledge, Trust, Love**

Holiness for Therese – Overview of Her Little Way

- The Little Way involves **knowing** who God really is (so understanding God) ... knowing who I really am in God's sight (so understanding myself) ... knowing His plan for me (which is "holiness") ... it involves seeing & experiencing His presence in my life (so not just a head knowledge, but also an experiential & a heart knowledge) ... so that's **knowledge**
- The 2nd ingredient is **trust**. The Little Way involves being **confident** in God & His plan & in His goodness, entrusting & abandoning myself to Him (so trusting completely in the Lord) ...
- Thirdly, the Little Way's about embracing God's **love** & loving Him in return – b/c love's a 2-way street ... it's "give" & "take", not just "take, take, take!"

God calls us to **love Him directly** –in prayer, in our thoughts, in our choices ... & He calls us to love Him, we could say "**indirectly**", through loving others.

In **St. Catherine of Siena's *Dialogue***, the Lord tells her: "Whatever you do in word or deed for the good of your neighbor is a real prayer" [Ch. 66, p.127]. He says: "Every sin committed against me is done by means of your neighbors" [Ch. 6, p.35]. And He adds: "every virtue of yours & every vice is put into action by means of your neighbor" [Ch. 6, p.33].

So "knowledge, trust, & love .."

- **Lastly**, the Little Way also involves practicing esp. what can be called the **little virtues**, like humility & poverty of spirit, gentleness, kindness, meekness, gratitude, simplicity, detachment ... so it's not about searching for extraordinary things, extraordinary gifts or graces, doing things that are enviable in the world's eyes.

The True Characteristic of Spiritual Childhood

The Carmelite **Fr. Jamart**, in his book on *the Complete Spiritual Doctrine of St. Therese*, says: "When we carefully look for the dominant character of Therese's doctrine, we find that it does not consist in any particular virtue but **in a special attitude of mind**. Everything is based on and flows from an attitude of spiritual childhood. It is this which gives unity to her teaching and imparts to it that simplicity which is so striking." (Jamart, 27)

The Little Way in Stick Figures

SLIDE 4

- This is my representation of what St. Therese's "Little Way" looks like. The big person is Jesus the little person (the child) is you.
- Maybe the first thing to notice is that **THE CHILD** doesn't look unhappy to be a child. He accepts who he is & he's embracing **St. John the Baptist's philosophy of life** ... St. John, who said of Jesus:

Holiness for Therese – Overview of Her Little Way

“He must increase (meaning: “Jesus must become greater”) & I must decrease (meaning: “I have to become less important ... the whole world doesn’t revolve around me!”)” (Jn 3:30).

- In Carmel, Therese realized that what she needed to do was not just to “be” little, but she needed to become always littler & littler. Why? b/c the smaller she became, the more Jesus would stoop down in His merciful love towards her.

- **Sr. Marie of the Trinity**, one of St. Therese’s novices, said: “She (Therese) never wearied of speaking about the confidence, the abandonment, the simplicity, the integrity, & the humility of the little child & always proposed it to me as a model”. **[repeat]**

- To be little, spiritually, means (most importantly) to be **humble** & not to rely on your own strength. A child is small in its own eyes & it’s okay with that. This means that the Little Way is for those who are humble or who want to become humble & are open to relying on God’s strength ... on His understanding ... on His plans, not on their own strength, their own understanding, their own plans. ***What’s the famous verse in Proverbs that corresponds to this?*** **Prov 3:5-6:** “Trust in the Lord w/ all your heart, lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, & He will direct your paths”.

- “To remain little”, says St. Therese, “is to recognize our nothingness, to expect everything from God (as a little child expects everything from its father; [&] it is to be not too distressed by its faults). *Finally, it is to be worried about nothing, and not to be set on earning our living.* Even among the poor, as long as the child is very little, they give him what is necessary; but as soon as he grows up, his father no longer wants to feed him and says: ‘Work now! You can take care of yourself.’ Very well ... it was so as not to hear this that I never wanted to grow up, feeling that I was incapable of earning *my living, the eternal life of Heaven!* ... To be little is also to not attribute to oneself the virtues that one practices, believing oneself capable of anything, but to recognize that God places this treasure of virtue in the hands of His little child, to be used when necessary; but it remains always God’s treasure. Finally, it is not to become discouraged over one’s faults, for little children fall often, but they are too little to hurt themselves very much.” (De Meester, *Power*, p. 228).

- **note:** “Being little” doesn’t mean “being irresponsible” & having a Peter-Pan mentality [never wanting to grow up like he did ... “Never-Never land” means “I never want to grow up!”] ... being little for St. Therese doesn’t mean what Peter Pan meant ... it means being totally dependent on God.

- Next, notice where the child’s looking ... what they’re focused on. Their eyes & their heart are **FOCUSED ON JESUS**. St. Paul says: “Set your mind on the things above, not on the things of the earth, for you have died, & your life is hidden w/ Christ in God” (**Col 3:2-3**). By turning to Jesus, we die to sin ... we also learn to die to selfishness as well ... & we learn to focus on Him ... not on everything else or everyone else.

SLIDE 5 [ex.: add here painting of Murillo, St. Francis Embracing Christ]

SLIDE 4

- The child in the picture is looking up to Jesus & reaching out to Him ... & Jesus is coming down to embrace him.
- And, as the child reaches out, he's doing 2 things: 1) he's **THROWING FLOWERS** at Jesus' feet, which was a metaphor that St. Therese specifically used in her description of the Little Way ... & 2) he's also **RAISING UP HIS FOOT** as his attempt to "climb up" to where Jesus is.
- So this shows that the child has a lot of **trust** in Our Lord ... whenever a child reaches out towards someone & smiles at them & tries to get closer to them ... that's a sign that they trust that person & want to be near them.

1) Regarding the **flowers**, St. Therese says: "There is only one thing for us to do here below: to throw at Jesus' feet the flowers of little sacrifices, to win Him through our caresses. That's the way in which I have taken hold of Him, and that's why I'll get such a good welcome [when I enter heaven]." So "flowers" are her way of symbolizing the little sacrifices that we make for Jesus ... the "denying ourselves" & the times we say "no" to ourselves & our selfishness so that we can offer something to the Lord.

- Therese says that, if the authentic spirit of childhood is based on **surrender to & trust in God**, it's no less based on **humility & sacrifice**. To her sister, Celine, she said: "We must do everything in our power, give w/o counting the cost, practice virtue at every opportunity, deny ourselves constantly, prove our love by all kinds of attentions & marks of affection; in a word, do all the good deeds in our power for the love of God. But since this is very little, it's important to place all our trust in Him ... that is what the Little Way of childhood is all about".

- And if we try to deny ourselves & make little sacrifices & we fail, then what do we do? Well, **"If at first you don't succeed, try, try again!"** God doesn't reward the success as much as He rewards the effort. *So try again ... don't get discouraged & stop trying ... to do so is to stop following the Little Way.*

When you stop trying, you definitely stop living St. Therese's Little Way. *Plus, if we constantly fail, just calmly & humbly ask the Lord for help! He'll help you.* Jesus loves helping & rescuing & saving people.

2) And the efforts that we make tie in w/ the **"raising of his foot"**. St. Therese once told her sister Celine: "Be like a child ... practice all the virtues & so always lift up your little foot to mount the ladder of holiness, but don't imagine that you'll be able to ascend the 1st step. No! The good Lord doesn't demand more from you than your good will. From the top of the stairs, He looks at you w/ love. Very soon, won over by your useless efforts, He'll come down & take you in His arms. He will carry you up. But if you stop lifting your little foot, He will leave you a long time on the ground".

Holiness for Therese – Overview of Her Little Way

- So we make efforts to grow & improve, even knowing that most likely we won't get very far in certain things ... but, when we fall or fail, we simply dust ourselves off & get back on the horse.

It's like that **in prayer** as well ... people say that they get very distracted when they pray (*join the club!*) ... okay, you're distracted ... don't worry about it!

- To a novice who worried about her **distractions** in prayer, St. Therese said: **"I, too, have many distractions, but as soon as I notice them, I pray for the persons who occupy my imagination & in that way they draw profit from my distractions."** She even said ... as for distractions, **"I accept them all, even the wildest fancies that cross my mind, for the love of God"**.

- When you see yourself distracted in prayer, simply & quietly & calmly & humbly turn your attention back to the Lord. That's what pleases Him ... it's not the "perfect prayer" that pleases Him ... it's your effort to just keep turning back to Him ... that's how He rewards us & fills us w/ His grace.

- In our homely **sketch** here, notice also **THE FACE** of the little one. His face looks like or is beginning to look like ... the face of Jesus ... w/ the smile & the "heavenly glow". Our Lord says in **Lk 6:40**: "No disciple is above his teacher, but everyone, when he is fully taught (or "fully trained"), will be like his teacher".

The Little Way is not a "dumbed-down" or childish spirituality ... it's a way to holiness ... it's a way to become like Our Lord.

- The other figure is **JESUS**. Notice what He's doing ... He's **BENDING DOWN & REACHING OUT HIS ARMS** towards the child. So the child actually reaching out to Jesus is just imitating Jesus' own action, essentially. God is always coming down to our level, to where we're at, & reaching out to us. He's not cold or distant or absent ... He doesn't "lord" it over us or stand over us w/ an air of superiority. He reaches down w/ love & mercy & kindness & understanding & patience & compassion & assistance.

- For St. Therese, Jesus is the **divine "elevator"** ... for her, God, through Christ, would raise the little one to Himself & make that little one a saint.

- Therese's focus was always on the **merciful love** of God. "Merciful love" is a love that stoops down, that comes down to us. There's no need for "merciful love" in the Trinity b/c **mercy is for misery** ... where there's no misery, there's no need for mercy! There's pure love among the 3 Persons of the Bl. Trinity, but no "merciful love", as we would understand it, b/c each Divine Person is a perfect equal to the Others. **"The nature of love,"** Therese would say, **"is to humble oneself"** (De Meester, *Power*, 162) – but there, she's talking about merciful love.

Merciful love is the love that reaches down to us, to “the miserable” ... to the sinner, like the Parable of the Good Samaritan ... it’s the love that picks us up & heals us of our sins ... but it’s also the love that reaches down to the child who’s needy & unable to save or take care of themselves, spiritually.

- Essentially, **God is the one who completes us.** St. Therese felt her “nothingness”, her “incompleteness”, her “imperfection” ... she felt these things deeply. And it was the Lord who drew her to Himself so that she could find her wholeness, her completeness, in Him ... not in a spouse, not in her family members, not in her accomplishments or abilities or in the praise of other people ... no, it was God’s merciful love that would complete her.

“Personal incompleteness” & Divine Love or Divine Mercy fit perfectly together ... if we let them fit together!

- In this vein, I’ll just share a paragraph from **Conrad De Meester’s** book on Therese, *“The Power of Confidence”*, where he writes: “imperfection alone cannot be a source of confidence to (Therese). What is not cannot be a *raison d’etre* (meaning “reason for existence”). My incompleteness can be the basis of my confidence only insofar as the recourse toward another that it provokes in me is supported by another movement in me, a movement justified by the positive & attractive qualities of the one upon whom I count for my completion.”

So he’s saying that Therese’s need for completeness & for perfection is accompanied by her movement towards the Lord & her attraction towards Him ... towards God, who’s also moving towards her ... & she recognizes this ... that He’s stooping down to pick her up, to embrace her & complete her, essentially ... & she knows Him well-enough to trust Him.

De Meester continues: “It is in this sense that Therese’s words must be interpreted when she says that her nothingness causes her joy. The observation of her nothingness brings her to confidence in Him who loves to lower Himself toward misery that entrusts itself (to Him). And even if she is delighted to have the opportunity to progress in *humility*, she is especially delighted that, becoming more humble, her confidence (in God) will be more pure and strong. ... When, in 1890, she ‘rejoiced with St. Paul in her infirmities,’ it was because her weakness brought her to love Jesus more generously and more exclusively. When, in 1897, she ‘glories in her weakness’, it is especially because of divine mercy that finds in her a greater prey, a prey that through confidence gladly yields to the loving undertakings of God. Thus, Therese draws her confidence from divine condescension as its deepest source. **‘Close to this Heart** (she said, meaning the Heart of Jesus) ... **Close to this Heart we learn courage, and especially confidence.’**” (p. 272)

- **Q:** So where should you look for your completeness? ... in the Heart of Jesus.

Even in the Bl. Trinity, we can say that the F completes the S, the S completes the F, & the HS completes both of them ... the Persons in the Bl. Trinity would be incomplete w/o each other ... all

the more so would we remain incomplete w/o Them! It's "perfect love" that completes or binds together the 3 Divine Persons ... it's "merciful love" that completes us.

[back to our stick figures]

- Jesus is **SMILING** b/c He sees someone who's turned towards Him ... someone who's making an effort to reach out to Him ... someone who's giving Him what little they have to give.

- If you want to **make Jesus frown**, just turn away from Him. *He'll still have His arms & His heart reaching out to you, but now He'll be doing so w/ sadness!* I don't think anyone here wants to make Our Lord sad!

- And, as we noted before ... more important than what we give to God is the amount of faith & love w/ which we give what we give. An older, well-off son of yours may give you a **Ferrari** for your birthday ... a little granddaughter may spend a week drawing a birthday card for you. Now, if you have a heart which is more like the heart of Jesus, which gift will be more valuable in your eyes?

It's not so much what we give ... it's the heart that we give it with.

- In the stick figure of Jesus we've also drawn in a **HEART**. For St. Therese, again, everything is seen in the light of God's merciful love. When She looks on the Lord, She thinks primarily of His love & mercy. This is the understanding of God that She carried around w/ her ... in her mind & in her heart.

Therese understood God as "merciful love". **Q:** How do you understand Him?

- St. Therese wrote to her sister, **Leonie**, telling her that perfection consists in "taking hold of Jesus by His Heart ... for us who are living under the law of love" (De Meester, *Power*, 274). To one of her spiritual children, **Fr. Bellière**, she wrote: before "the abysses of love & mercy of the Heart of Jesus," one must act w/ a "loving audacity", "w/ an entirely filial confidence" ... to reach the treasures of Jesus' merciful love, one must follow "the way of simple & loving confidence" (De Meester, *Power*, 274).

- Therese's confidence was a very loving confidence. She constantly lived in the presence of a loving Father & a loving Savior filled w/ mercy. Before Him, all fear vanished. "I am far from being on the way of fear," Therese writes; "ever since I have been given the grace to understand the love of the Heart of Jesus, I admit that it has expelled all fear from my heart" (De Meester, *Power*, 275).

- St. Therese says: "How easy it is to please Jesus, to delight His Heart! one has only to love Him, without looking at one's self, without examining one's faults too much." (De Meester, *Power*, 135)

Holiness for Therese – Overview of Her Little Way

So look at Him & His heart ... more than you look at yourself & your own heart. *Focusing on yourself is a recipe for misery!*

- Therese said that every soul has for its mission to **glorify some divine perfection**, & she said that she had honored God especially in His infinite mercy. It was through that mercy that she contemplated all the other attributes of God (Jamart, 34).
- So what we see in the stick-figure illustration is, on **St. Therese's end**, littleness & confidence & loving gestures ... & on **Jesus' end**, we see His "bigness", you could say, & His merciful love that reaches down to embrace His daughter, His little spouse, so that He can complete Her, be perfectly united to her, & bring Her to His home – to their home – in heaven ... it reminds us of Our Lord's words at the Last Supper to His disciples: "I go to prepare a place for you ... & I will come again & will take you to myself, that where I am you also may be" (**Jn 14:2-3**) ... "& you know the way", Jesus says in v.4 ... & Therese would respond: "Yes, it's the way of spiritual childhood! I know the way!"

The Little Way in Her Own Words

So if we were to specifically ask St. Therese: **"What is the Way of spiritual childhood?"**, what would she say? One day in her convent, Mother Agnes (which was her older sister Pauline) asked Therese to explain the Way she desired to teach souls after her death. Sr. Therese replied: **"It's the way of spiritual childhood, the way of confidence and abandonment to God. I want to teach them the little means which have proved so perfectly successful for myself. I want to tell them that there is only one thing for us to do here below: to throw at Jesus' feet the flowers of little sacrifices, to win Him through our caresses. That's the way in which I have taken hold of Him, and that's why I'll get such a good welcome [when I enter heaven]."**

A few days later, she was asked what she meant by remaining a little child. She said: **"It means that we acknowledge our nothingness ... that we expect everything from the good Lord, as a child expects everything from its father ... it means to worry about nothing, not to build upon fortune ... it means to remain little, seeking only to gather flowers, the flowers of sacrifice, and to offer them to the good Lord for His pleasure. It also means not to attribute to ourselves the virtues we practice, not to believe that we're capable of anything, but to acknowledge that it's the good Lord who has placed that treasure in the hand of His little child that He may use it when He needs it, but it remains always God's own treasure. Finally, it means that we must not be discouraged by our faults, for children fall frequently."** (p.28)

So in those 2 exchanges between St. Therese and her sisters, you can find all the fundamental characteristics of her spiritual childhood.

Depending on the time, we can maybe stop here for the 1st Conference.

Other Snippets of the Little Way

“**Directors**”, says St. Therese, “have others advance in perfection by having them perform a great number of acts of virtue, and they are right; but my director, who is Jesus, teaches me not to count up my acts. He teaches me to do *all* through love, to refuse Him nothing, to be content when He gives me a chance of proving to Him that I love Him; but this is done in peace, in *abandonment* ... it is Jesus who is doing all in me and I am doing nothing.” (De Meester, *Power*, 136)

If we compare the Little Way to a **fire** ... **De Meester** writes: “Love is a fire which we must maintain: the wood for it might be out of our reach, but we will always have little pieces of straw at our disposal. These little pieces of straw are an attentiveness which pleases the Lord and — let us note well Jesus' role compared to that of Therese— ‘then [Jesus Himself] throws on the fire a lot of wood.’ We feel ‘the *strength* that love’s warmth gives.’ ‘I have experienced it,’ says Therese, and she begins to describe her ‘little pieces of straw’ ... ‘when I am *feeling* nothing, when I am incapable of praying, of practicing virtue, then is the moment for seeking little opportunities, *nothings*. ... For example, a smile, a friendly word, when I would like to say nothing or put on a look of annoyance. ... I want at least to tell Him frequently that I love Him; this is not difficult and it keeps the *fire* going ... and even if this fire of love seems to have gone out, Jesus could then relight it.’ However, ‘Jesus is really powerful enough to keep the fire going by Himself?’ (De Meester, *Power*, 136-137).

Chronology of the Little Way (De Meester) – maybe leave this just for personal reading & skip to “Conclusion of Manuscript B” at the bottom

In this last part of the conference, I’d like to give more or less a chronology of the Little Way & St. Therese’s discovery of it. It’ll help give an idea of how St. Therese herself matured spiritually.

De Meester places St. Therese’s “discovery” of the Little Way at the end of 1894. At the beginning of the 6th chapter of his book “*The Power of Confidence*”, he summarizes how she got there. He writes:

Having been born in a very Christian environment, Therese hears at the age of nine a first clear call to perfection. At the same time, she understands the relativity of “striking works” and the importance of renunciation, humility, suffering, and the hidden life. The conception of her ideal of love, love of God and humanity, is developed during the course of the nine intensive months that follow the “grace of Christmas 1886” [*which is when she received what we could call the grace of “growing up”, of being more mature*]. In the face of opposition to her intention to enter Carmel soon, she opens herself up to abandonment to the will of Jesus. Having entered Carmel, her dream of love does not weaken at all in the midst of great exterior and interior sufferings. The only means that she knows of arriving at perfection is love ... but love by its own choice travels the way of humility, of life hidden to the eyes of all in order to be seen solely by the One Whom she wants to love most intensely and most exclusively. Her weakness helps her in that respect. The Holy Face of Jesus is her mirror.

Her exterior suffering being greatly lessened, Therese concentrates further on the more interior renunciation of herself. She applies herself with heightened attention to disappear from her own eyes, to withdraw from everything that can exalt her in any way. Thus, she further insists on the love of “little things,” a way to which she had committed herself since her childhood. She expects merit, progress, and holiness not from herself, but from God. Her weakness appears to her now less as something that must be “transformed” into love than as something which Jesus will decide how to use. She abandons herself to Him in everything, including the area of love. This is the great overall realization of the year 1893 – (that) God must do all. The long-lasting experience of her weakness and her powerlessness to be as she would like to be, and a marvelous understanding of the priority of the love of God ... all these have facilitated this new perspective of abandonment, this new ranking of values, this psychological restructuring of her notion of holiness. Personal activities become more clearly cooperations with the initiative of God. Therese understands better the divine phase into which her acts of love, imperfect love, enter - it is He who must perfect them, prolong them, and make them “yield a return.” In this dialogue, Therese listens to the word of Jesus much more attentively. She becomes in that sense more passive.

It was toward the end of the year 1894 that Therese received the great grace — a grace equally charismatic, although she was not conscious of it at the time — of discovering her “little way of spiritual childhood.” But did there in fact still remain something to discover after the insights of the year 1893? Therese had already become little, she knew her weakness, she was humble, she had confidence in God, she knew that everything must come from Him, she loved “little” acts of love. ... What more would be necessary besides this? Is all this not already spiritual childhood? Yes, it is a kind of spiritual childhood, but this is not yet the Theresian way of spiritual childhood! The aforementioned elements have all had their importance on the level of origination and they already form a synthesis, but the discovery of the “little way,” still more than being a new synthesis, implies new realizations about particular elements. If it’s allowable for us to use Theresian terminology from the month of July 1893, we could express it as follows: if, beforehand, Therese realized the divine ‘play’ in her search for holiness — this is ‘the goal!’ — without yet knowing “how [Jesus] goes about” making her love “yield a return” (LT 142, 794), now, in revealing to her the “little way,” Jesus also reveals to her “how He goes about it” in order to sanctify her ... and Therese, illuminated, will fully commit herself and will adapt herself to God's game. It’s a new discovery, a new psychological structuring of her “way,” and a new impetus in the way.

Let us explain. What was the light shed by the two biblical texts which were the foundation of her great discovery? To believe Therese's account of this discovery concerning it, this light is neither the knowledge of her weakness nor the conviction that her sanctification cannot be the result of her own efforts. Therese's testimonies, even in the previous years, seem to confirm it wonderfully: she no longer needs to discover it! The discovery relates more to God, it is a penetration of the divine mystery: it is the discovery of mercy as *mercy*. Therese understood God's love for her, His forbearance, His goodness, His help. But what she understands in light of these two scriptural verses is not simply that God's love is real, prior to ours, and faithful, but that it is a love which comes down from above to

Holiness for Therese – Overview of Her Little Way

below, a love which descends, which seeks the little one and especially *because* he or she is little, in order to *fill* them. Therese discovers that mercy is *for* the little, that it is what it is *because* one is little, and *how great* it is for the little.

This light is a new principle for understanding her entire way. In divine mercy, even with the help of her weakness, Therese discovers the dynamism of her sanctification, triggered from her side by confidence in this mercy. To approach God as a little one no longer means, then, to humble oneself, to disappear so that He alone is the Beloved. That continues, but as a basis for further soaring: after she accepts her nothingness, Therese entrusts herself to mercy, sure that it will fill her with its grace. Littleness, instead of being mainly humility, becomes mainly *confidence*. Under the light of mercy and subjected to God by confidence, powerlessness becomes in a way a pledge of divine intervention. The new way of holiness, the “little way” which Therese discovered, certainly generates a new thrust. Therese has now understood the way between God and herself and rushes into it. How much better one will travel on a road that is all lit up! *Implicitly* she has already progressed along this path: because the “little way” that she discovers is so essentially Christian that every good way toward holiness in a certain sense contains it. But Therese was advancing along this way without knowing it, like a blind person, slowly, hesitantly, and making mistakes — which is what such a way imposes. The illumination that God gives her on His mercy will henceforth light the way by which she will advance toward Him. (De Meester, *Power*, 145-148).

A New Sketch of the Little Way, Manuscript A, 1895

When Therese is talking about the desire for holiness, she writes:

“This desire could certainly appear audacious if one were to consider how weak and imperfect I was, and how, after seven years in the religious life, I am still weak and imperfect. I always feel, however, the same bold confidence of becoming a great Saint, because I don't count on my merits since I have *none*, but I trust in Him Who is Virtue and Holiness itself. God alone, content with my feeble efforts, will raise me to Himself and, clothing me with His infinite merits, He will make me a *Saint*.”

Even in the absence of the word “mercy” and of the double image of father-child, this passage where Therese uses simple and precise concepts constitutes one of the best formulations that she has given us of her “little way.” It contains a clear indication of the goal: to become holy and a great saint. Of her perception of herself: she is “*weak and imperfect*.” Of the means that she uses: she tries but her efforts are “*weak*” and insufficient; she does not have any 'merits' and therefore does not intend “*to count*” on them. Her assurance consists in her “*bold confidence*,” in her 'trust in Him Who is and gives Virtue and Holiness.' This trust, in appearance “*audacious*,” is legitimized by the mercy of the One Who Himself “*will be content*” with her weak efforts and will intervene to sanctify the “*weak*”. He 'will clothe her with His own merits' and — descending and rising again — “*will raise her to Himself*,” to holiness. (De Meester, *Power*, 177)

Conclusion of Manuscript B & Synthesis of the Little Way, 1896

All of the central ideas of the “little way” are represented here. **De Meester** quotes the passage at the end of the manuscript in its entirety:

“O Jesus! allow me in my boundless gratitude to say to You that *Your love reaches unto folly*. ... In the presence of this folly, how can You not desire that my heart leap towards You? How can my confidence, then, have any limits? [This is a beautiful expression of the dynamic core of her confidence.] Ah! I know that the Saints, too, have committed their *follies* for You and they have done great things because they are *eagles*...”

“Jesus, I am too little to perform great actions... and my own *folly* is this: to trust that Your Love will accept me as a victim ... My *folly* consists in begging the Eagles, my brothers, to obtain for me the favor of flying towards the Sun of Love with *the Divine Eagle’s own wings*. ...”

“As long as You desire it, O my Beloved, Your little bird will remain without strength and without wings, still it will always stay with its gaze fixed upon You. It wants to *be fascinated* by Your divine glance. It wants to become the *prey* of Your Love. ... One day I hope that You, the Adorable Eagle, will come to fetch 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. ... [Here Therese draws a long-dotted line; is it a confession of her powerlessness to express the depth of her soul? And she continues:]

“O Jesus! why can't I tell all *little souls* how unspeakable Your condescension is. ... I feel that if, by some impossibility, 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 a total confidence to Your infinite mercy.” (De Meester, *Power*, 202-203)