

## SCHOOLS OF HOLINESS

### IV. ST. TERESA OF LISIEUX

THE story of St. Teresa of Lisieux must be almost unique in the history of the saints. She was not quite twenty-five years old when she died, on September 30th, 1897, having been a nun for just over nine years, and many who, when she was born, were already older than she was to be when she died, lived to see her name enrolled among the saints. Indeed, her whole history from her birth to her canonization lies well within the lifetime of countless persons now living who would by no means willingly consider themselves old. This, remembering the traditional slowness of the Church in according her official recognition to the heroic sanctity of any individual, would have been remarkable enough had the stage of Teresa's life been set in public view: had she been a path-breaker in some region of active spiritual or social work: or had she been a martyr, an apostle, or a foundress. But her life, as to three fifths of it, was spent entirely within the narrow shelter of a provincial home of the petite **bourgeoisie**: and as to the remainder, in the virtual obliteration of a Carmelite cloister. Still more remarkable in these circumstances is the fact that canonization may verily be said to have been conferred upon her by public acclamation even before the Church had set her seal to it. This inversion of the accustomed order of things has happened before, but then the subject of it has always (as one should expect) been one who in lifetime had already taken the public eye—one need go no further back for an example than to the Cure d'Ars or to St. Benedict Joseph Labre. But to her public—the little world of Lisieux—she was only known (and soon forgotten) as the youngest of the five daughters of **M. Martin**, the watchmaker, whose well-known piety seemed to have destined all his children to the religious life: while in Carmel she was known just as the third of those children to enter the one convent, and probably to most of the nuns as, on the

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whole, the least distinguished of the three. In the very year of her death, when all the community knew that she was dying, she herself (with what satisfaction, one may imagine!) overheard one lay-sister say to another, 'What *will* our Mother find to say about Sister Teresa when she dies!', alluding to the Carmelite custom of sending brief appreciations of their deceased sisters to other communities of their Order. In fact, when the time came, the Prioress said nothing, or next to nothing. Instead, she printed and distributed Teresa's own account of her life, written at the command of her sister Pauline (Sister Agnes of Jesus) who had held the office of Prioress between two periods of Mother Gonzaga's rule. In this enchanting document, written in obvious if unconscious, but finally triumphant, struggle with the traditional 'common form' of such *journaux intimes*, is revealed the secret of that 'Little Way' which has been by far the most important contribution to the Spiritual science of our generation. The greater part of the *Récit d'une Ame* is autobiographical, and the 'Secret' is rather implied by the course of her story than explicitly defined as a method of perfection. But in the last chapter, added by special request of Pauline some time after the rest had been completed, Teresa lays bare without reserve the lines upon which she had ordered her life of heroic love and sacrifice. The theme is simple: it is abandonment of self into the hands of God, no new doctrine: yes, but an abandonment so thorough, so detailed, so consistent, so deep-reaching as to involve the smallest units of her volitional activity. Indeed, it is at its purest and sublimest in just those least observable matters wherein fidelity and resignation to the all-pervading, all controlling will of God has least external repercussion either upon the notice of others or upon the consciousness of the soul itself. It is the way of absolute giving, without limit or respite or reserve: a heroism of self-surrender commensurate with the very greatest occasions for it that could arise, and not in the least degree diminished in splendour because in fact no such occasions ever did arise. It is the *Little Way* because it lies always among little things, but in

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her it was of that quality which would have been adequate to the dizziest height and the fiercest strain.

Looked at from another point of view it might be called the Way of Perfect Acceptance. Everything, were it the tiniest trifle, was of God and from God directly for her. She accepted everything, without difference or distinction, as a holy thing, taking it reverently and delicately from His fingers into the centre of her heart. The size or importance of the thing mattered to her not at all: she knew nothing of any 'big' or 'little,' for the sufficing and inestimable worth of everything that she had to do or to be or to endure was that all of it, greatest or least, first or last, was His Will, His personal Will for her. It was nothing less than Divine Wisdom itself that taught her how far more complete a sacrifice in God's eyes is the acceptance, as direct from Him, of little troublesome teasing things, so easily avoided, than the offering of something perhaps much bigger to look at but chosen by oneself. 'Sacrifice and oblation thou didst not desire . . . in the head of the book it is written of me that I should do thy will.'

The more one studies Teresa of Lisieux, whether in the records of those who knew her or in her own copious self-revelations, the more one realizes the profundity of their error who, misled no doubt by the simplicity and joyousness of the image thus evoked (powerfully aided by the insipid and conventionalized portraits of her now so much in vogue) think of her principally as something bright and pretty and facile. like the pictures which she used to paint for festal occasions in the convent. Her 'Little Way' becomes, so regarded, but a petty way after all: and she herself no more than a highly privileged child miraculously preserved from those struggles and agonies which one had been led to believe were of the essence of the life of sanctity. Devotion to the 'Little Flower' (how one comes to dislike the title!) has been, to many such, a mere outlet for sentimentality and an argument for release from the uncomfortable implications of Christ's own warning that the way of perfection is hard and narrow, and that consequently they are few who persevere therein, But no mis-

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take could be more capital. The lesson of her life is actually the exact opposite of this. What it teaches—in words of one syllable, so to say—is that holiness is an achievement that costs one the full of one's resources of strength and courage. It is a goal to which there is no short cut, a Temple to which there is no back entrance. To it there is but one way, His Who said of Himself 'I am the Way': it is the way of self-renunciation, of burden-carrying and yoke-bearing, a way stretching for most of its length through darkness and the desert, with no other star to guide one than the far-distant light of Faith. Holiness is the expression of the love of God possessing and actuating the soul throughout all its being, and the love of God is, as all true love is, realized in progressive self-giving. Love, whether of God or of the creature, is one and the self-same thing, and it is expressed in one and the self-same way: but the foundations of the two differ in this, that the latter is born of the knowledge of an object similar to ourselves, ascertainable through the reason and the senses, whereas the former, being directed to the ineffable Being of God, needs besides this an infusion of supernatural grace transcending the scope of these faculties as its term transcends theirs, and proceeding, when the subject is fit to receive it, from the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of Love, who utters God's own immortal Love through us as our own. But in order to become such a channel of the Divine operation the soul has to make itself ready for it by doing all that can be done to that end in its own order. Little enough, indeed, but at the expenditure, none the less, of its whole substance — 'If thou wilt be perfect go sell all whatever thou hast.' This giving (for, after all, what have we to give?) comes in the end, by an apparent paradox, to *receiving*, for the act of entire renunciation of all right of ownership whatsoever is the obverse of an entire acceptance of everything as of God and from Him, involving a voluntary and detailed recognition of Him and His gift in every happening of life down to the most inconsiderable. Does one not realize what such an unbroken chain of acts of surrender as this will imply, and how in consequence her life, which was spent in forg-

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ing and welding just such a chain, should have worn itself out in so short a space?

Her 'Little Way,' just because it meant the unremitting and minute implementing of this surrender in each and all of the little things that fill up the immensely greater portion of our lives, was in fact a Way of unlimited breadth and content: it meant not the fruit and the flower only, but the stock and the root too—the root first, and then of necessity all the rest with it. One understands how to one bent as Teresa was on missing no opportunity of giving wholly whatever her hand found to give, such trifling irritations as the splashings of a too vigorous sister at the wash-tub or the bead-rattling of a restless neighbour in Choir, were quite, fit vehicles for that heroic abnegation which had the occasion been greater she would have practised no less whole-heartedly. She could put all her holocaust of self into patient ministrations to a querulous invalid or smiling graciousness to a naturally antipathetic sister, and she could accept the exchange of a gracefully shaped and coloured water jug in her cell for an ugly cracked one, or bear without seeking relief the heat and dust and discomfort of household work in the summer time, or grievously chapped and chilblained fingers in the winter, with no less heroism than she would (as, in fact, at the end she did) accept agonies of pain and exhaustion.

Perhaps the chief difference between Teresa and most other saints was that she did not ask for or want greater occasions of suffering or self-surrender: they were not in her way, and she knew well that they would have drawn no more exactly upon her will than did these lesser ones that came to her unasked. Thus, though she practised the regular corporal austerities of Rule with exactness, she never spontaneously added anything of the kind to what was already prescribed. Though no doubt she was well aware that such things may easily be made into an excuse for escape from bearing with the unsought disagreeables that offer themselves so readily in the course of ordinary convent life, and perhaps had had to recognize that those who did much in this way were not invariably the persons

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that she revered most, one feels that her real reason was her knowledge that to her they would afford no wider scope for the spirit of surrender and acceptance that animated her than did the humble-seeming opportunities of which she availed herself so greedily.

It might be, and indeed has been, urged in depreciation of the value of her 'Little Way' for any but exceptional souls, that Teresa had been, so to speak, in a Noviciate from her earliest days. Both her parents were persons of very saintly life, and their family of five girls (two sons and two daughters had died in infancy) was brought up in a singularly religious, almost conventual, atmosphere and sheltered with the utmost solicitude from all contact with dangerous worldly influences. She, in addition, was the object of an adoring love on the part of a father whose dearest hope was that she might one day become a real saint, and who early initiated her in the life of good works and recollection. Yet on the other hand, the intense and unbroken happiness of her home-life might just as well have proved an obstacle to her renunciation of the world, which nevertheless she made at the unusually early age of fifteen. But, in fact, whatever may have been her privileges by nature or by grace, so far from detracting from the value to us of the lesson that her manner of life affords, they were the very reason why we can read and learn that lesson so easily and feel its truth and attraction so strongly. God so fitted her, and so disposed her circumstances, that the secret of her holiness could not be missed. The lives of the saints are offered to us for our study in order that we may see there at their finest and best the virtues, qualities, and motives that made them what they were. We are not called upon to imitate them in the personal details of their several lives, but to adapt to our own lives what theirs teach us. It is no favouritism (so to call it!) on God's part, far less any injustice to us but quite the contrary, that here and there He so endows a saint by nature or enriches him by grace that he is able to present to us an unflawed example of this or that Christian excellence to serve us for an ideal. The lives of some saints offer us the

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spectacle, in their most highly developed, and therefore most authentic and intelligible, form of one or another of the virtues that should be the aim of all of us: others exhibit the perfect practical exercise of general spiritual principles in varying circumstances. The life of St. Teresa of Lisieux is one of those which from time to time, as the world needs it, present a fundamental scheme of readjustment or reinterpretation of our attitude towards God, particularly in regard of the pursuit of holiness, opening for us a fresh vista of the Way of Perfection.

It is the same journey to the same City, but with a new map to travel by.

K. H. J. STEUART, S.J.

## THE FILM IN EDUCATION

Shorn of wearisome details the recent dispute between Sir James Marchant and the British Film Institute— which acts as liason between the teachers and the Cinema Trade— reveals the disquieting fact that a complete mechanical education is to be part of our conditioned life of tomorrow. The teacher already challenged by robot Radio is to be superseded by the Talkie Educator; and even a Peoples' Cinema University.

The Cinema Trade offers itself as an instrument in the cause of education; it would say:

' You teachers know little of film technique, and for our part we know little about teaching; let us collaborate: we will turn out the films you need.'

Could anything be fairer than that? Make friends of the Mammon of Iniquity, of a giant organization involving some five hundred million pounds of capital, and chiefly controlled by an international ring of Jews!

A remarkable article appeared in *La Revue Catholique des Idées et des Faits*, Feb. 1929, under the title *Les Juifs et le Cinéma* in which we are told that the production