

And then shall our Lord dispend him, in his house, at his feast that men shall have; that is, he shall set him in his joy without end.

The clerk owe to be light of the world to lewd men. As men that are in mirkness without light go wrong, so might men of this world go wrong till they be learned through teaching of clerks. And therefore hear [ye] the gospel and the understanding of it! for God says himself: 'Blessed be they that hear my words and keep them'. Amen.



ST TERESA OF LISIEUX IN HER LETTERS

BY

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THE Letters of St Teresa of Lisieux, now first published in English¹, are an indispensable companion to her Autobiography. For they shed new light on her character and underline the special *cachet* of her sanctity. In the many short letters and occasional *billets* we are permitted to watch her soul as it were in working dress—and, let us say it at once, from

the first letter to the last we see sheer sanctity. John Beevers, in his very understanding biography of her with the somewhat flashy title *Storm of Glory*² writes: 'St Thérèse of the Child Jesus is the greatest Saint of modern times . . . because she has liberated sanctity and made it obviously accessible to everyone'. It is this that strikes the reader so forcibly in her letters.

Let us look first at the recipients. They are almost all addressed to members of her own family, except for those to the two missionaries entrusted to her prayers during her last years, and a few to Carmelite and Visitation nuns. If we compare them with the letters of a St Catherine of Siena or with those of her own holy Mother, St Teresa, who numbered Popes, kings, cardinals and other high dignitaries both of the Church and of the world among their correspondents and who showed themselves keenly alive to the problems and events of their time, the letters of the modern Saint seem, at first glance, quite uninteresting. For, as regards worldly affairs,

¹ *The Collected Letters of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*. Translated by F. J. Sheed. (Sheed & Ward, 1949; 15s.)

² Sheed & Ward, 1949; 10s.6d.

their horizon is limited to the interests of a small town—Madame X expecting a baby or Monsieur Y being in poor health—and more particularly of her convent—thanks for a present of fish or excitement over a lobster jumping out of a saucepan. Even in the spiritual sphere, some readers might be disappointed. For we look in vain for ecstasies, visions, locutions, levitations, all those by-products of the mystical life so readily admired by the great public. There is no trace of such phenomena in these letters. There is only a consuming love of God and our Lord and a perfection of charity to her neighbour combined with a selflessness and mastery of emotions which seem almost miraculous in a person who died at an age when most men and women are just beginning to discipline their characters.

It is the great merit of this edition, which reproduces the letters exactly as the Saint has written them without any embellishments, and which is excellently translated, that it places each letter as far as possible in its exact context. Teresa was a child of barely fifteen when she wrote, before her entry into Carmel: 'Truly, on earth one must be attached to nothing, not even to the most innocent things, for they fail you just when you least expect it'. And, a few days later: 'It is surely true that a drop of gall must be mingled in every cup, but I find that trials help us to detach ourselves from the earth.' There is no doubt that she was spiritually extraordinarily precocious and, at the age of fifteen, had the maturity of a woman of twenty-five. For it is perfectly clear from her letters that what she writes is not just pious sentiment or derived from spiritual books, but is lived experience: 'What a grace', she writes as a postulant to her sister Celine some months later, 'when in the morning we feel no courage or strength for the practice of virtue—then is the moment to put the axe to the root of the tree. Instead of wasting time picking up little bits of straw, one can dig for diamonds. . . . It is true that now and then we feel for some instants together, that our treasures are not worth the trouble of amassing; that is the difficult moment, one is tempted to drop the whole thing; but in an act of love, even *not felt*, all is restored, and more.'

It seems one of the greatest paradoxes of the history of Christian spirituality that this saint, upon whom the Holy Ghost poured his gift of fortitude so abundantly, should, at the same time, not only have been so thoroughly sentimentalised by many of her admirers, but that she should herself have given no small excuse for this sentimentalisation. As in her autobiography, so in her letters there are many passages that sound frankly sentimental. To cite just one,

taken from a little story made by her (she was then twenty-one), called 'The Dream of the Child Jesus'. 'But night has come. The moon sheds its silvery light and the sweet Child Jesus sleeps. . . . His little hand does not leave the flowers which gave him such pleasure during the day and his heart goes on dreaming of the happiness of his beloved bride' (i.e. Mother Agnes of Jesus). Her well-known announcement of the Spiritual Marriage (the ceremony of taking the black veil) of 'Little Thérèse Martin, now lady and princess of the realms' to 'Jesus, King of Kings and Lord of Lords' is another example of the defect so irritating even to some of her admirers, namely her failure to free herself from the language and conventions of her class and time. Whereas other saints, for example St Catherine of Siena, soared far above the limitations of their origin, and wrote in a style marvellously adapted to the subjects they treated, Teresa of Lisieux remains the little bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century, whose letters teem with baby lambs and lilies and little reeds, dewdrops and lyres, and who will write on an envelope containing a holy picture: 'Little picture painted by little Thérèse for the 25th birthday of little Céline with the permission of little Mother Prioress'.

There are, as we have seen, very different pages, written in a strong and simple style—yet the fact remains that over and over again we are faced with such apparent puerilities as the above, which, one would have thought, the constant reading of the New Testament, the great St Teresa and St John of the Cross should have made impossible.

It seems to us that precisely this defect was allowed by divine Providence to remain in her in order to humble *us*. John Bevers has made a very convincing study of the various qualities by which St Teresa is opposed to the various forms of pride characteristic of our age. To these we would add intellectual pride and a snobbery that avoids like poison the obvious word or example, and which looks down with the utmost contempt on anything unsophisticated. It would almost seem as if Almighty God had deliberately scandalised our highbrows by allying the highest sanctity to the forms of expression current in the nineteenth century 'parlours' of the provincial *petit bourgeoisie*, than which there could be nothing more distasteful to the twentieth century intellectual. Attracted by the sheer artistic beauty of the language of St John of the Cross we may sometimes be tempted to disregard the contents of his works. It is just the opposite with St Teresa. We must first have grasped the sublimity of her teaching before we can swallow the form in which she couches it. In fact, an act of humility is required from

those of us who pride ourselves on our intellectual and artistic discernment, before we can submit to her guidance.

But what a guide she is! Céline had dreamt that she was being martyred. This is what her sixteen year old sister replies to her account: 'My Céline's dream is very lovely, perhaps one day it will come true. . . but meanwhile let us begin our martyrdom, let us allow Jesus to rend away from us all we cling to most, and refuse him nothing. Before we die by the sword, let us die by pin-stabs. . . .' What a wealth of wisdom lies in this single sentence. How many of us are dreaming—daydreaming—from time to time about the fortitude we would display in suffering for the faith, about the heights of contemplation which we would attain if we could lead a hermit's life. 'Before we die by the sword, let us die by pin-stabs. . . .' How many of us, so strong and holy in daydreams, are not piteously weak as soon as it comes to accepting the pin-pricks of daily life? But sanctity is charity, and charity is shown not in imaginary martyrdoms nor in romantic hermitages (surely, of all the various forms of religious life that of the anchorite is the least fitted to teach the practice of fraternal charity and can without danger be embraced only by souls far advanced on the road to perfection), but it is shown precisely in the loving acceptance of daily annoyances, of the weaknesses of others, of all those little opportunities to practise self-denial and to do good to our neighbour. Never to let pass an opportunity to curb our self-will, to edify others—this indeed requires heroic virtue; the more heroic because it is so inconspicuous. Let us then die by pin-stabs—but let us die happily, joyfully, like St Teresa, with a smile on our lips.

For St Teresa is the saint of the smile; and, a trait that does not come out in her Autobiography but shows itself in her letters, is that she could also joke and be merry. 'You little wretch', she writes to one of her cousins, 'fancy you with a sore foot. It's most extraordinary, for your feet are so tiny that surely there isn't room. Fortunately it will soon be Pentecost, the Holy Ghost will certainly repair a serious omission He made on the day of your Confirmation. He gave you all His gifts, but unfortunately He forgot a gift that would be very useful to you. You guess which? I'm going to beg Him during my Retreat that on Pentecost day you will be as *strong* as little Samson. . . . (Your strength must be not in your hair, but in your foot.)' The letters to her family in the world are often full of fun, and always of a glowing affection and tenderness that might at first sight seem surprising in one who insists so much on perfect detachment. It is, however, a fact that the saints, though rigorously detached from all those affections that might hinder

their intimacy with God, give their warmest friendship and sympathy wherever they know there is no danger of natural weakness being mingled with it. Hence the warmth of expression in the letters of a St Francis de Sales as in those of St Teresa, who, for example, writes to her aunt: 'The smallest of your girls feels utterly incompetent to tell you once more the love she has for you and all her wishes, but a mother's heart has no trouble in divining all that passes in the soul of her child (her aunt had taken the place of her mother after the death of Mme Martin). So, darling aunt, I shall not try to put into words feelings you have known so long.'

There is one last point we would like to make. What is, perhaps, most surprising in these letters is the difference in tone which depends on the character of their recipients. She is playful and full of fun with her little cousins, warmly affectionate with her father, her uncle and aunt, serious and full of wisdom with her sister Céline and especially with the two missionaries entrusted to her prayers, and, lastly, pouring out all the aspirations and desires of her ardent soul without restraint to her beloved Pauline, particularly after this favourite sister had become her Mother in religion when she was made Prioress. To whatever letter we may turn, there is never a complaint, never so much as the slightest trait of self-love. They either speak of God or of things that will give pleasure or edification to the recipients. This is more remarkable as a large part of her religious life, indeed most of it, was spent in aridity or even desolation—those times when the soul is most tempted to be preoccupied with herself and her own miseries. But all she permits herself in these states is to paint a picture of the Child Jesus asleep: 'I painted the Divine Child', she writes, 'to show what He is in regard to me. . . . In plain fact He is almost always *asleep*. . . . Poor Thérèse's Jesus does not caress her as once He caressed her saintly Mother. . . . All the same the closed eyes of little Jesus speak deep things in my soul, and, if He does not caress me, I try to give *Him* pleasure.'

I try to give *Him* pleasure—that, after all, is the core of her life and of her message, which is most fully revealed in the letters written in the last months of her illness—but these should be read rather than be written about.