

Week 27: Love deep down in the heart of the Church

Last Friday we celebrated the feast day of St Therese of the Child Jesus, who entered the Carmel in Lisieux at the age of 15 and died of consumption 9 years later. A seemingly short earthly life in an obscure monastery in provincial France at a time when religious pieties, like the fashions of the day, seem to us rather fussy. And yet this young woman manifested in her short life a deep understanding of her vocation to follow Christ. Indeed she has been likened to the Desert Fathers and Mothers whose simplicity of life and inner resolve express the radical nature of Christian vocation, the reality of Gospel living.

At the end of her study of *Therese The Hidden Face*, Ida Gorres wrote: Thus, the middle class idyll of Les Buissonnets (*Therese's childhood home*), all plush and mahogany, is linked with the fantastically heroic experiment of Charles de Foucauld in the Sahara; so too the present day work of his growing band of Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus in urban slums ... In the worn out survivals of dying social forms as well as in the dramatic, far-flung preliminary projects for future Christian ways of life there is growing, silently and indestructably, that moss which is the floor of sanctity. Therefore Therese is neither old fashioned nor timely; she belongs to no front or faction. In her, rather, the age and youth of the Church meet one another, the permanence and the rebirth of the Church in a timeless present. And with this her frail young figure is suddenly revealed as an eschatological sign: in the shadow of that mysterious promise of Elijah in the closing

verses of the ¹Old Testament which says that this last messenger before the great and terrible day of the Lord will “reconcile heart of father to son, heart of son to father”. In Therese there gathered and became purified the deep, intimate, essential unchanging elements of the Faith and of Love. As the perfected butterfly breaks out of the chrysalis, so she emerges transformed from the shrivelling shell of her period and appears before us as the pure embodiment of Christian reality. To be sure, she represents also a perfection of the period’s ideal; but in fulfilling the law of her own being, she overcomes it. She who knew only obedience, only listening, unquestionably accepted the highly questionable elements in her contemporaries’ piety. But the burning purity of her touch melted away all the old slag. What she grasped and what she embodied is once again the beginning, the core, the original meaning. We see in her girlish face the hidden face of the Church, the Face of the Hidden Church, which in the chaos of time flowers, eternally young and beautiful, to greet the returning Lord.

That is a powerful summary of Therese’s vocation, both on earth and beyond: simple, as in her description of prayer as *a movement of the heart, a cry of gratitude and love* and yet as uncompromising as Abba Allonius’ words: *If a man does not say in his heart there is only myself and God he will not gain peace.*

¹ Malachi 4:5-6

And what of us who are also called *to be love, deep down in the heart of the Church?* Nowadays we describe our way of life as counter cultural, often challenging the goals and ideals of our C21st world. And still love remains at the heart of all things: God's love for us, witnessed in God's created world and our love for God, known in and through His Son, the Christ. We are also called, like Therese, to live our vocation of love in a hidden, obscure and rather ordinary context, in this school of the Lord's service, following Him and wholeheartedly serving him in faith, in hope and in love.