

EMPTY HANDS

This passage has been selected from Ida F. Görres' 'THE HIDDEN FACE: A STUDY OF ST. THERESE OF LISIEUX, and is reprinted here with the kind permission of Pantheon Books, Inc. Copyright © 1959 by Ida Friederike Görres. This particular passage is presented because, in the view of the Editors, it shows admirably, in a non-technical, non-theological way, the importance for the spiritual life of a view of grace closely paralleling that of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Therese developed, without deviation, from a childish desire for spiritual rewards the mature attitude of spiritual hope. Certainly she was allured by the crowns, pearls and diamonds which she had been promised as a little girl. The attraction at first was no different, and no less operative, from that of the prizes, certificates and good marks she received in school—the French educational system appeals with an amazingly untroubled conscience to the ambition of pupils. But as early as the age of fifteen, when still at home, she wrote to her sisters in the convent: "And when I think that for one joyfully endured sacrifice we shall be able to love God the more throughout all eternity!" Very soon "Heaven" meant to her nothing but this: to see God face to face and participate in His life. Therese soon recognized as her only reward Him who desires to be our surpassing reward: "One single expectation makes my heart beat high: the love which I shall receive and then be able to give!"¹

Among the nuns in the convent she frequently encountered that crude, egotistical and arithmetical hope of reward which so constantly offends against true Catholic principle. Out of a misguided view of good works and merit the nuns zealously counted sacrifices and acts of virtue, in order to present them to God as reckonings which entitled them to their legitimate recompense. They anxiously watched the fall and rise of their bank accounts in Heaven. They even seem to have estimated with keen interest the presumable stage in Heaven that their fellow nuns would attain. Therese reports the remark: "I did not think you would add this pearl to your crown." Such phrases were the order of the day; during Therese's last sickness we hear of them again and again. With saintly zeal she laboured to restore the pure meaning of the faith.

It never occurred to Therese to doubt the reality of the heavenly reward; that reality became the clearer the more she came to understand it as the fruit of surpassing Mercy and not the fruit of our own grasping efforts. On 17th September, 1890 she wrote to Marie: "Jesus wishes to give us His Heaven out of pure grace (*gratuitement*)."¹ However, she also never doubted that the reward would have gradations which bear a direct relation to the activities of men; incomprehensible that may be, but the Scriptures speak of the faithful servant who added ten talents and will be set over ten cities; he who made five, over five; who gave a prophet a drink of water will receive a prophet's reward; who gave a disciple to drink, the disciple's reward. In fact: "This light and momentary affliction brings with it a reward multiplied every way, loading us with everlasting glory," says the Apostle Paul.² How that is done, by what secret counsels of His Mercy God "reckons" this up, was a subject that Therese did not worry her head about. She knew only that she loved and wanted love, whether this love meant merit and reward or not. She knew, too, that all this love, even the purest, even the terrifyingly "selfless" love which in the eyes of men is so incomprehensible, is only a gift, is a response to Him who loved us first. "That love resides, not in our showing any love for God, but in His showing love for us first, when He sent out His Son to be an atonement for our sins."³

How then could Therese possibly want to transform the fullness which He gave her into a new claim upon Him? "Her crown did not interest her at all," a fellow nun testifies with obvious amazement. "She told me that she left this matter entirely to God."⁴ "If, and of course this is impossible, God Himself should not see my good works, I would not be troubled about it. I love Him so intensely that often I should like to do something to give Him joy without His knowing that it comes from me. If He knows it and sees it, after all, He is as it were obliged to compensate me for it . . . I should like to save Him even this effort."⁵

Let us, however, be careful not to read into such words a stoical indifference toward the promised "treasure of glory." The hopeful Christian takes all of God's promises seriously, with passionate earnestness. He stakes his whole life on them, and lives joyously in the anticipation of joys. This kind of hope was the true element in which Therese lived. Her piety, founded on faith, tested by love, was nourished by this hope. The expectation of Heaven was the staff on which she leaned in her progress through the desert. The more she was oppressed by inner emptiness and aridity, the more fervently her whole being bent upon the bliss-

ful day when the Lord would awaken for her also and His face would shine upon her again. But she knew at every moment that the bliss to which she looked forward as a child at Christmas, as an exile to his homeland, as a bride to her wedding, would come from overflowing grace and not as the result of her own accomplishments.

At fourteen Therese had already drawn this conclusion from Abbé Arminjon's book on the "Mysteries of the World to Come." "As I read, I experienced that joy which the world cannot give, something of what God has prepared for those who love Him. All our sacrifices seemed quite petty compared with this reward, and I wanted so much to love Jesus with my whole heart and prove it in a thousand ways while I still had the chance." ⁶

"If in the hour of my death I shall see how good God is to me, how He intends to heap His affection upon me for all eternity—and that I can never again prove mine to Him by sacrifices—how impossible that will be to bear if on earth I had not done everything in my power to give Him joy!" ⁷

Therese's insights do not derive from a single moment of illumination. They derive from the experience of her childhood, that being able to be good was in itself a grace; that all goodness, love, tenderness and zeal of the innocent heart were in themselves already a response to love received; that love, care, instruction and training were reflected back by the self. There followed the years of "darkness" in her childhood, of scruples and insuperable weakness which proved to her the inadequacy of even the best intentions, the most desperate efforts. Then had come the tremendous experience of her "conversion" at Christmas 1887, the gift of a stability that all her own efforts had been unable to achieve. There followed her initiation into the Mystery of the Lord's Passion, which revealed the overflowing measure of the redeeming, the loving mercy of God.

Then, when she was at last a young nun daily encountering the greatness of God in the Scriptures and the liturgy, all the claims and self-importance of human vanity definitively vanished. "Thou art my Lord, for Thou needest not my good." ⁸ These words from Psalm 15 are quoted only once in Therese's writings, but they stand invisibly above every page. Her deep, certain knowledge had its source not in philosophical considerations of the nature of man, nor in theological conceptions of the nature of God, grace or freedom. It sprang, rather, from the

knowledge which indwells in love, from living intercourse with the living God. . . .

At her sister's sick-bed, Pauline said: "When I come to die, alas, I shall have nothing to give to God; I shall arrive with empty hands, and that troubles me deeply." Therese responded spiritedly: "It is just the reverse with me—if I had all the works of St. Paul to offer, I would still feel myself to be an unprofitable servant; I would still consider that my hands were empty. But that is precisely what gives me joy, for *since I have nothing I must receive everything from God.*" And again: "How I look forward to going to Heaven! But when I think of Our Lord's words: Behold I come and bring the reward with me, to give to each according to his works, then I tell myself that He will probably be embarrassed when He comes to me, because I have none. He cannot reward me according to *my* works. So much the better, for I have confidence that He will reward me according to His."

"*Because I have none.*" Others might base their hope upon laboriously acquired spiritual treasures—Therese's illimitable trust bubbled up solely from the springs of her jubilant poverty. What is empty can be filled. "Where there is nothing, God is," as a profound Irish proverb puts it. . . .

Therese is considered to be above all the saint of childlike trust, and she deserves the name. But her confidence did not spring from childlike ignorance of the gravity of man's fate and Christian destiny. Rather, it sprang from the abyss which devoured everything upon which men—and especially devout men—were accustomed to base their certainty before God. Therese trusted because God is such that one can trust Him without a pledge, because He will receive and supply, with incomprehensible love, all those who throw themselves naked into His hands, expecting everything from Him. "In our prayers we must follow the example of those stupid people who ask for things and do not know where to stop, who repeat their stammering pleas again and again, without considering propriety, and who often ask for things which no one would have thought of giving of his own accord, and which people give to them in order to be quit of them. We must say to God: 'I know well that I shall never be worthy of the things I hope for—but I hold out my hands to You like a beggar child, and I know that You will more than grant my wishes *because You are so good!*'"⁹ She would not have wondered at any miracle, Pauline says; she thought God's omnipotence was always in the service of His love for us, and was therefore available to us at all times.

The Lord's words to St. Mechtilde touched her deeply: "I tell you that it gives Me great joy when men expect great things of Me. Great as their faith and their boldness may be, I shall give to them far beyond their merits. It is indeed not possible that men shall fail to receive all that they have hoped of My power and My mercy." ¹⁰

Again and again Therese sought in the scriptures for confirmation of her boldness. She found it in ample measure, and again and again founded her confidence upon it. "Have You not permitted me for so long to deal boldly with You, my God? As the prodigal son's father, to his eldest, so You have spoken to me: All that is Mine is yours." Up to the last she repeated: "We can never hope for too much of God, who is so mighty and merciful; we will receive from Him precisely as much as we confidently expect of Him." And sitting in the garden, sick unto death, she wrote with unsteady fingers: "Yes, I have seen it now: all my expectations will be more than fulfilled. Yes, the Lord will do wonders for me infinitely exceeding my boundless desires!" . . .

There is a certain danger in this insight which had to be met. Seldom can we absorb a great spiritual perception without so coming under its sway that we needlessly and fantastically play it off against all other truths. Therein lies the root of all heresies. Recognition of the insignificance of human action in itself, as a factor of salvation, of the surpassing power of merciful love, contains within itself a dangerous reef. Both the German Reformation of the sixteenth and Latin quietism of the seventeenth centuries foundered on this reef. Those who passionately oppose the claim that "works" are a factor in salvation almost necessarily go to the extreme of denying the necessity and virtue of works altogether, and rejecting all "religious action" as arrogance before God.

In the still and limited world of her convent Therese encountered this danger, too. When Sister Marie of the Holy Trinity wanted to send out Therese's Act of Obligation to all and sundry, she forbade it, pointing out that what she had written "might easily be misunderstood as quietism."

When Celine, reading Ecclesiastes, came across the passage: "Mercy will assign to each his place according to his works," her wits had been sufficiently sharpened by Therese's instruction for her to ask her young mistress: "How can that be, since St. Paul says that we shall be justified through grace alone?" Therese replied to her "with ardour"—and with excellent theological lucidity:

"We must do everything we are obliged to do: give without reckon-

ing, practice virtue whenever opportunity offers, constantly overcome ourselves, prove our love by all the little acts of tenderness and consideration we can muster . . . In a word, we must produce all the good works that lie within our strength—out of love for God. But it is in truth indispensable to place our whole trust in Him *who alone sanctifies our works and who can sanctify us without works* for He can even raise children to Abraham out of stones. Yes, it is needful, when we have done everything that we believe we have to do, to confess ourselves unprofitable servants, *at the same time hoping that God out of grace will give us everything we need.* This is the little way of childhood.”

This statement is perhaps the most profound and exact presentation Therese ever made of “her way.” It permits no further misunderstandings. She disposes of all faith in any automatic magical power inherent in human actions, as a means of attaining salvation. But then, once that has been made clear, there arises courageous, ardent, transcendent faith in Him *who sanctifies our works*. He does not depend upon our sanctified works, but He knows the human heart which He created, knows how unquenchable is its longing to give itself, to dare, to serve, to create. And He who brought into being this noble urge, after the image of His own Love, who gave it glorious opportunities for fulfilment in the natural realm—He deigns, out of graciousness and mercy, to grant us a similar fulfilment in the realm of grace. He accepts what we wish to give, and, moreover, gives us the effectiveness of our gift.

¹ Canonization Proceedings, II, 247.

² II Cor. 4:17.

³ I Jn. 4:10.

⁴ Canonization Proceedings, I, 50.

⁵ *Conseils et Souvenirs*.

⁶ *Story of a Soul*, chap. v.

⁷ *L'Esprit de la Bienheureuse Therese* . . . (Lisieux Carmel, n. d.), p. 50.

⁸ Therese's version of the quote.

⁹ Canonization Proceedings, II, 361.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.