"Sisters in Doing the Truth: Dorothy Day and St. Thérèse de Lisieux"

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Living as we were, in a time of world revolution, when...the people of the world were rising to make a better world for themselves, I wondered what this new saint had to offer.
—Dorothy Day

Dorothy Day concluded *Loaves and Fishes*, her 1963 testimony to the apostolic movement which she co-founded, with a vignette describing the state of a typical Catholic Worker house of hospitality at the end of the day:

To me, this is the hardest hour—the evening hour. Then arises the need to discriminate, the need to use common sense, the conflict in trying to follow the Gospel and “to give to him who asks.” What to do about the able-bodied who take advantage? How to meet those who drink and have all but exhausted the patience of the people trying to forgive seventy times seven? It is easiest when we have literally given away all we have and can say only, “We have no more money.”

...As we recite the *confiteor*, I reflect that we, too, have sinned seventy times seven... The absolution brings us the ease to go on with the psalms. The psalm for tonight is the Fifteenth, and it touches my heart:

I set the Lord ever before me; with him at my right hand I shall not be disturbed. Therefore my heart is glad and my soul rejoices; my body too abides in confidence;

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because you will not abandon my soul to the nether world, nor will you suffer your faithful one to undergo corruption.

...Marie, who is a Protestant, knows that work is also prayer. During the day she has walked the city streets, gathering up all the newspapers from the refuse baskets on the corners to bring us—this is her contribution to the work of the paper. Now the singing is over. Marie picks up her broom and begins to sweep. Readying the room for tomorrow is her last act of today. She is always the last to leave. When her work is done, she pauses near the door, and then, with a little look around of satisfaction, departs.¹

I quote this passage at length because it captures with abundant realism three distinct elements of Dorothy Day’s spiritual identity and ecclesial mission: service to the poor, vigilant prayer, and daily work. None of the three is without its trials. Dorothy can give to the needy only what she herself has received. She can praise the Lord almighty only if she has sought absolution in her own fragile heart. Her co-worker, fittingly named Marie, can take satisfaction in her work only after the room has been emptied and the floor swept. Dorothy’s decision to leave the last word with Marie’s silent *opus Dei* speaks volumes. There is the ever so delicate suggestion that the Scriptural paradigm—Mary’s life of contemplation stands higher than Martha’s daily toils—may need to be re-examined. More importantly, Dorothy is highlighting the deeper spiritual dimension of Marie’s ritual. Laboring in solitude where the authorship of her work remains anonymous, those who arrive the next day will not necessarily know who cleaned the room. Even though Marie’s work requires no special training, it has its proper dignity. She takes pride in her contribution to the house of hospitality, for she “knows that work is also prayer.” The three activities together—direct submission to serve those most in need, chanting the Psalms, and daily work—are all included in what St. Thérèse of Lisieux called the Little Way of fulfilling one’s vocation to sanctity.

In this essay I will examine Dorothy Day’s devotion to “the Little Way.” In the daily labor of people like Marie, Dorothy saw a model of holiness that was not only unsung but available to absolutely everyone. Dorothy maintained that following the call to sanctity in this quiet manner was the response to manifold social and personal problems which she confronted on a daily basis:

I see around me sin, suffering, and utterable destitution. There is misery, materialism, degradation, ugliness on every side. All I see some days is sin.

The problem is gigantic. Throughout the world there is homelessness, famine, fear, and war and the threat of war. We live in a time of gigantic evil. It is hopeless to think of combating it by any means than that of sanctity. To think of overcoming such evil by material means, by alleviations, by changes in the social order only—all this is utterly hopeless.  

Dorothy wanted to lift the veil of desiccated piety from the familiar image of the Catholic saints. Moreover, she was convinced that responding to the call to sanctity at the very center of one’s daily life was the only way to confront widespread global injustices without exacerbating the cycle of violence and despair so apparent in the world.  

By Dorothy’s own frequent testimony, she herself was trained in the Little Way by reading the writings of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. To be sure, “the little Teresa” was not the only saintly person who influenced Dorothy. St. Francis of Assisi, St. Teresa of Avila (“the greater Teresa”), St. Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich, Mahatma Gandhi, Thomas Verner Moore, and, of course, Peter Maurin are just some of the holy women and men who influenced her. What is unique about Dorothy’s devotion to Thérèse is not only her singular prominence in Dorothy’s life but also the fact that upon her first examination of Thérèse’s writings Dorothy characterized them as “pious pap” and an insult to a woman’s intelligence. The question therefore arises, “Why did Dorothy, a thoroughly American, former suffragist, a former communist, and a life-long peace activist, come to embrace a seemingly model bourgeois youth of late nineteenth century Europe as her favorite saint?”  

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2In a recent article that appeared in the Houston Catholic Worker, Jim Allaire has uncovered a similar statement from November 1951 in the unpublished notebooks of Dorothy Day: “Sanctity alone will meet the crisis of the day. Nothing else matters. One can feed the poor, shelter the homeless, comfort the afflicted, but if you have not charity, the Love of God, Sanctity, it is worthless.” Jim Allaire, “Thérèse of Lisieux inspired Dorothy Day,” Houston Catholic Worker, May–June 1996, 6. Cf. Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, “The Politics of the Little Way: Dorothy Day Reads Thérèse of Lisieux,” in American Catholic Traditions: Resources for Renewal, ed. Sandra Yocum Mize (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997), 77-95.
3Dorothy Day, Thérèse (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1979), viii.
5Ibid., 11. Cf. William D. Miller, Dorothy Day, 431: “When—oh when is there time to write? The art of human contacts. The discipline of writing, of work. It will get done.”
Dorothy was all too aware of the modern writer’s temptation to narcissism.

Writing from their own experiences, both women were conscious of adopting a confessional mode. They recognized that “writing a book is hard, because ‘you are giving yourself away.’” Their writing was not just a public account of transactions with God but a spiritual exercise of a very distinct sort. It has been said of St. Teresa of Avila that she was impelled to write about her mystical experiences at least in part by an anxious need to mediate the ineffable speech of God to “the intractable reality of the everyday world.” Communicating the experience of God’s love and its effect on one’s own life does not soften the harshness of the lived experience. Despite the manifest intensity of her devotion, Teresa was self-conscious of how feebly she could describe Christ’s love for humanity. The need to write about the experience remains permanently unsated for a spiritual realist since she confronts the likelihood that many will maintain that the reality described “might be nothing more than the manifestation of neurosis, a fanciful illusion about some ideal being that she has either guiltily repressed or lost.” Dorothy and Thérèse of Lisieux faced this writer’s block as well. Neither thematize the theology of angst as frequently as does Teresa; however, both saw the words they penned as highly tenuous but necessary responses to the presence and knowledge of God in their lives.

Dorothy Day was initially repelled by Thérèse’s writing. She recounts the story of being given a copy of The Story of a Soul in 1928 by an Augustinian priest who was preparing her for confirmation. Dorothy reports she read the book out of a sense of obligation to her confessor and found it colorless, monotonous, too small in fact for my notice. What kind of saint was this who felt that she had to practice heroic charity in eating what was put in front of her, in taking medicine, enduring cold and heat, restraint, enduring the society of mediocre souls, in following the strict regime of the convent of Carmelite nuns which she had joined at the age of

fifteen? A splash of dirty water from the careless washing of a nun next to her in the laundry, was mentioned as a “mortification” when the very root of the word meant death, and I was reading in my Daily Missal of saints stretched out on the rack, burnt by flames, starving themselves in the desert and so on.

Compared to Dorothy’s contemporaneous involvement in the muscular, heroic drama of the Communist labor rallies, The Story of a Soul was banal and irrelevant. “Living as we were, in a time of world revolution, when, as I felt, the people of the world were rising to make a better world for themselves, I wondered what this new saint had to offer.” Dorothy compared Thérèse’s spirituality unfavorably with the radical commitment to “the brotherhood of man” being espoused by a character in Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov. Thérèse’s Little Way seemed focused on isolated individual efforts rather than true social solidarity. She questioned whether Thérèse’s simple story actually could “draw men’s souls out of their solitude, and spur them on to some act of brotherly love.”

Some time passed before Dorothy changed her opinion about the Little Flower. She raised her daughter Tamar Teresa and came to understand more clearly “the basic oppositions between Catholicism and Marxism.” Peter Maurin, whom Dorothy met in 1932, may have played some role in this development since he admired Thérèse a great deal.

There are a few scattered references to Thérèse in Dorothy’s writings from the period 1936-1945 which indicate that her mind had already begun to change. In 1936 she called upon the saint to pray for 50,000 members of the International Seamen’s Union who had gone on strike. In her 1939 book House of Hospitality, Dorothy refers to the Little Way as an example of “those people who were greatly daring in what they wished to do for

9The Long Loneliness, 10.
11Dorothy says of Thérèse: “she, the realist, well knew that suffering of body and soul is not lofty and exalted, but mean and cruel, a reflection of the blackness of hell” (Thérèse, 161).
13Thérèse, viii.
14Ibid.
15Ibid.
16The juxtaposition between Dostoevsky and Thérèse is found in a unpublished manuscript fragment written by Dorothy at the time she was working on her book Thérèse. See Brigid O’Shea Merriman, O.S.F., Searching for Christ: The Spirituality of Dorothy Day (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 44-45.
17Ibid.
18Thérèse, x.
19Searching for Christ, 292, n. 43.
20For this and what follows in this paragraph, I am relying upon Searching for Christ, 191-97.
God.” Brigid O’Shea Merriman, O.S.F., points to a significant insight reached during her 1943-44 sabbatical from The Catholic Worker. Comparing Thérèse with St. Teresa of Avila, Dorothy concluded that St. Thérèse of Lisieux was the loftier vocation, the harder and more intense life. She did “nothing” but love... From that “year” I spent away from work, I began to understand the greatness of the Little Flower. By doing nothing, she did everything. She let loose powers, consolations, a stream of faith, hope and love that will never cease to flow.21

These remarks demonstrate that Dorothy had developed a more sympathetic appraisal of the saint over a decade before she began actually to write the biography Thérèse.

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, it is clear that Dorothy sought to intensify her understanding of and commitment to the Little Way. Her change of heart was not simply a matter of re-reading Thérèse’s writings. As Jim Allaire has noted, Dorothy “discovered the Little Way within her experience of Catholic Worker life. Year upon year of serving meals, making beds, cleaning, and conversing with the destitute, outcast people provided Dorothy with ‘schooling’ in the Little Way.”22 By October 1948 the editors of The Catholic Worker (including Dorothy) began a practice that was to continue for some years to come. The annual Fall Appeal was written on the Feast of the Little Flower and included a quote from her on not expecting to find love without suffering: “Let us suffer if needs be, with bitterness and without courage. Jesus truly suffered with sadness. Without sadness would the soul suffer? And we would suffer generously, grandly: what illusion.”23 In her October 1949 installment “On Pilgrimage” to The Catholic Worker, Dorothy invoked the words of both Teresas. Dorothy resuscitates the image of the little Teresa from exactly the type of misperception she herself had once made. Dorothy wrote:

The Little Flower said: “I should not be happy in heaven if I was not able to provide little pleasures on earth for those I love... I shall spend my heaven doing good on earth.” I like these quotations. Either the Little Flower is looked upon (perhaps because of her nickname) with sentimentality, or, as one gets to know her better, with dread. On that frail battleground of her flesh was fought the wars of today... To her God was a consuming flame... Thank God for the saints whose feast days come around and remind us that we too are called to be saints.24

Whereas Dorothy originally found fault with the Little Flower’s vulnerability and smallness of actions, here she lauds “the frail battleground of her flesh.” In 1928 Dorothy opted to imitate “heroic” saints, Joan of Arc and the other martyrs “stretched out on the rack, burnt by flames, starving themselves in the desert.” By 1949 Dorothy grasped a clear idea of the profound sacrifice of self in Thérèse’s Little Way. Since Thérèse receives the divine wound of Love in her ordinary daily service to others and to God, she emerges as the paradigm for Catholic Worker spirituality.

It is very difficult from an examination of her published writings to say exactly when Dorothy began in earnest to work on Thérèse, but one can roughly identify the early 1950s as the time when the project took shape. She interrupts her February, 1953 entry of “On Pilgrimage” with the quip “When will I be able to finish my Teresa book?”25 Jim Allaire reports that “there were those around her who thought another book on Thérèse wasn’t needed; then her manuscript, which she had worked on for more than five years, was rejected by her publisher.”26 Another elucidating anecdote is recounted in William Miller’s biography. According to Miller, the publication in 1952 of Dorothy’s The Long Loneliness met with very enthusiastic reviews from major newspapers and editorial houses and even sizable royalties. Given her proven success, Eugene Exman of Harper publishing house was eager to have Dorothy get started on another project. Dorothy toyed with the idea of submitting a manuscript on Peter Maurin, one which she had worked on in the 1940s only to have it rejected by a publisher. But her mind was set on Thérèse. In 1956 Exman offered “to make it financially possible” for Dorothy to travel to France for an extended period of time “to gather material.” He argued that Dorothy would write best if her daily experience arose “from the soil of France.”

21“My All is Grace” fragment A, dated “between April 1951 and 10 July 1953.
23“Our Fall Appeal,” The Catholic Worker, October 1948, 2.
25The Catholic Worker, February 1953, 7.
26“Thérèse of Lisieux inspired Dorothy Day,” 1. This is confirmed by what she says in the preface: “...some of my friends had tried to dissuade me from writing another book on Thérèse. ‘The best book has been written.’ But of course there is never a last word said about holiness, about examples of holiness in our time” (Thérèse, x).
Dorothy turned down the offer of a travel grant. One can only surmise the reasons for her refusal. Although trained as an investigative reporter, detailed archival research on French sources probably did not suit Dorothy’s personality. In fact, the published work seems to have relied entirely on translated materials. More significantly, Dorothy was probably incapable of extricating herself from her life in the United States, for her daughter Tamar blessed her with a sixth grandchild in 1951. Furthermore, Dorothy answered suspicions of communist sympathizing made against The Catholic Worker only by deciding to return to acts of civil disobedience and imprisonment, specifically, for noncompliance with air-raid drills in New York City. As Miller writes, “Dorothy’s wounds bled a long time, and there were many occasions after concluding her journal at night that the pages were soaked with blood from the slights and abuses she had received that day and in the past days.” These incidents confirm Dorothy’s resolve to write about Thérèse very much from her own point of view, emphasizing aspects of Thérèse’s life, and of Thérèse’s family’s life, that interested Dorothy in particular.

Dorothy consulted readily available theological works on Thérèse, including those of Hans Urs von Balthasar, André Combes, R.P. Liagre, and Henri Ghéon. She was aware of the publication in 1956 of a facsimile edition of the so-called manuscrits autobiographiques, which reproduced the original writings of Thérèse unencumbered by the editorial emendations of her two sisters. Dorothy’s real aim was not to add to the voluminous scholarship on the Carmelite’s spirituality. She wished to present a portrait of the saint that accorded with her own experience of the Little Way and that would foster Thérèse’s desire to make Love be loved.

She writes as an advocate rather than a detached observer. Her first goal was the dispel the saccharine image of the saint that even epithets like “little Flower” and photographs of her perpetuated. Thérèse repeatedly used the term “little.” Dorothy explained, not because she was endorsing the practice of good deeds on a small as opposed to large scale. For Thérèse the Little Way was not about the achievement of virtue at all. “It is rather to recognize the fact that God puts treasures of virtue into the hands of his little children to make use of them in time of need.”

Following in the tradition of St. Bonaventure’s sapiential interpretation of the theologically expressive, stigmatized St. Francis, Thérèse can be read as an restoration of the saint’s true form through a more realistic, cruciform physiognomy. Like Bonaventure Dorothy perceives an inward image of divine glory, the “beauty of the Lord’s wisdom,” etched onto the flesh of the Little Flower. Thérèse, Dorothy noted, was actually very tall, not little. Not only her writings but even pictures of her taken four months before her death were altered.

She was always a round-faced, merry child and in the painting her sister Celine made of her, “a composite picture” it was called, there was an attempt made to “refine” her, to hollow the cheeks, to give a more ascetic look, a more nun-like contour.

Dorothy objected to the nuns’ attempt to conceal the saint’s physical suffering.

Before the end, she became skin and bones. Father Petitot said that she became so thin that her bones protruded through her skin. Tuberculosis of the intestines set in and gangrene, and when she was raised up in bed to get her breath, she gasped that it was as though she were sitting on spikes.

The depiction of graphic detail is not intended to evoke a visceral reaction. Elsewhere Dorothy notes that Thérèse’s biographers have also toned down the real joy in life which she related in her writings. In this passage, however, Dorothy wanted her reader to grasp that hylomorphic unity of spiritual and corporal fragility in Thérèse’s suffering. Dorothy’s devotion to the “frail battleground” of the Little Flower’s flesh was no mere metaphor.

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27Dorothy Day, 433-34.
28Thérèse, x.
30Thérèse, 167.
31Ibid.
33Thérèse, viii.
34Ibid., 163.
35Ibid., 164.
36Ibid., 109.
37“Of the notable things about Thérèse, this little modern saint, was the physical expression of her joys and sorrows and desires” (Thérèse, 118).
Thérèse also addresses the question of the Little Flower's direct relation to social activism. Dorothy, schooled in the nineteenth century socialism of Kropotkin and Proudhon (who opined, "property is theft"), establishes the social context for Thérèse's middle class upbringing. Rejected by a religious order for poor health and inadequate education, Thérèse's father, Louis Martin, worked as a watchmaker. Rather than impugn him for a lack of working class roots, Dorothy sees the dignity of his labor. He earned his living "by the sweat of his brow rather than that of any one else's—and one can sweat quite as much over little things as over big things."^39 Louis Martin lived through a tumultuous period in France in which Marxists and anarchists were warring for control of the working class and the State. Dorothy records Louis Martin's brush with "the Voltairean spirit" in Paris in 1848 and wishfully hypothesizes that he had had contact with radical groups.\(^4^0\) Except for the murderous military campaign on neighboring towns in the Franco-Prussian war in 1870-71, the Martin family generally steered clear of the large-scale history of social conflicts. This does not mean that they were either ignorant to what was taking place around them or indifferent to real social ills. Dorothy makes reference to the pioneering work of Louis Martin with the French Workmen's Circles founded by Count Albert de Mun and René de la Tour du Pin in 1871.\(^4^1\) The children were raised giving one day a week to service to the poor.\(^4^2\) Accordingly, Dorothy judges that Thérèse's consciousness of the misery of the poor was quite genuine and arose at an early age.\(^4^3\) Although Dorothy herself was influenced by and espoused structural critiques of the social order, she still recognizes that Thérèse's social consciousness, like the rest of her spirituality, was one with her Little Way.\(^4^4\)

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^39Thérèse, 6.
^40Ibid., 6-7.
^41Ibid., 26, 30. For background on this movement, Dorothy consulted the very informative work of Sr. Miriam Lynch, The Organized Social Apostolate of Albert de Mun (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1952).
^42Thérèse, 30.
^43Ibid., 74. Cf. 115. During their pilgrimage to Rome, Louis Martin and his daughters had daily contact with nobles and aristocrats. "But we were not impressed," Thérèse dryly opines.

Dorothy did not want to dress up Thérèse in the garb of Catholic radicalism of the mid-twentieth century:

I'm not trying to say that the Little Flower would have gone out on picket lines and spoken on Communist platforms or embraced her Protestant neighbors if there were any in the town of Alençon. She was the product of her environment, bourgeois, middle class, the daughter of skilled workers, comfortable, frugal people who lived apart from the world with their eyes on God.\(^4^5\)

When writing about the practice of being taken by her father to visit relatives in the countryside, Dorothy again placed Thérèse in her proper bourgeois context: "One is reminded of Jane Austen's books and the visiting back and forth at country homes, in such stories as Mansfield Park and Emma."\(^4^6\) After her conversion to the Little Way, Dorothy still saw no opposition between Thérèse's middle class spirituality and her own well-known commitment to a radical politics. Just as Dorothy sought to read the spiritual significance in, not apart from the physical expressivity of the actual Thérèse, so too in the realm of politics.

Thérèse had no mere sentimental empathy for the suffering of the poor. Thérèse cannot separate her mission of vigilant prayer from the suffering of any one of the members of the body of Christ.\(^4^7\) Thérèse directed her whole person to teaching souls to love God by submitting to the call to sanctity outlined in the Gospel. She fulfilled Peter Maurin's mandate to "make a society where it is easier for men to be good."\(^4^8\) Dorothy knew that the social principles to which she had devoted her life derived from a simple message of personal (but not individual) conversion of self:

religious/mystical ethic of ideal ends is radically transformed by the unconventionally bourgeois politics of Thérèse's Little Way. Bauerschmidt rightly notes that Thérèse's Little Way is neither a political program nor a flight from responsibility for transforming the world, nor even a middle term between politics and mysticism.

\(^4^5\)Catholic Worker, April 1952, reprinted in Dorothy Day: Selected Writings, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992), 274.
\(^4^6\)Thérèse, 78. Cf. 5: "I have heard the Little Flower condemned because she came from a bourgeois atmosphere, because she lived always in comfortable surroundings."
\(^4^7\)This is especially true of the famous incident in which she prayed successfully that the life of a convicted murderer be spared. She later referred to the man as her first child Franzini (Thérèse, 110-11.)
\(^4^8\)"Appeal," The Catholic Worker, October 1949, 2.
Even those dread words, pacifism and anarchism, when you get down to it, mean that we try always to love, rather than coerce, "to be what we want the other fellow to be," to be the least, to have no authority over others, to begin with that microcosm man, or rather, with ourselves.\(^{49}\)

In a word, the radical spirituality of Thérèse's Little Way was not just, pace O'Shea Merriman, "a complement" to Dorothy's social activism.\(^{50}\) Thérèse's life embodied the Catholic Worker principles in toto, for Thérèse's model was a practical and accessible way to participate in the communion of all the saints.

II. Domestic Religion

In her preface to Thérèse, Dorothy explains that she intends to underscore the importance of Thérèse's family. This editorial decision was ratified by the Church's proclamation in 1994 of Zélie and Louis Martin (Thérèse's parents) as "venerable." Dorothy expresses particular gratitude to the French Franciscan, Stéphane-Joseph Piat, for his Story of a Family, a stirring defense of the role played by the Martin family in Thérèse's formation.\(^{51}\)

Piat wrote his book in 1944 surrounded literally by the rubble that World War II left in its wake. He describes how the bombing campaign against the city of Lisieux destroyed virtually everything but the Carmelite cloister. Not surprisingly, his work includes a strong anti-Communist apology for the institution of the family as the foundation stone for the moral and spiritual rebuilding of Europe.\(^{52}\) The affinity between Dorothy's interest in Thérèse's family and the reinforcement of traditional values was also maintained by the American Jim Allaire, who just one year ago said: "In this era that yearns for healthy 'family values,' it is noteworthy that Thérèse's family struck Dorothy as very significant."\(^{53}\)

Dorothy's highlighting of the Martin family goes deeper than a restoration of "the good old moral tradition" (Piat's term) of affirming the social value of the family.\(^{54}\) Her interest in Thérèse's family life was neither a mere apology for family values nor a displaced literary substitute for the absent natural paternal mentor in the religious upbringing of her daughter Tamar. (Tamar's father, Dorothy's common-law husband Forster Batterham, was an atheist.)\(^{55}\) Dorothy, no stranger to Communist social planning, would have seconded Piat's acerbic attack on the Marxist chimera that with the advent of the socialist state the bourgeois institution of the marriage bond would be superseded. Yet Dorothy's defense of family values was not restorationist. Catholic personalism brought to her study of the saint's family a search for a new synthesis. Dorothy admired equally the family as indispensable for personal spiritual development and The Catholic Worker's notion of aiding workers not just as individuals working for the state but as family members contributing to the common good.\(^{56}\)

The theology of the family implicit in Thérèse does not accord with "conventional" views on the family. For example, a recent commentator on Dorothy's moral vision in relation to contemporary feminism remarked:

In spite of the fact that she had been willing to bear her child outside of a legally sanctioned marriage and remained an anarchist as a Catholic, Day's occasional references to marriage reflect conventional views.\(^{57}\)

Even though the author rightly views Dorothy's positions on women's issues as sui generis, the sentence just cited may still lead to the misleading idea that Dorothy's anarchic view of the capitalist state was oriented to some end other than the

\(^{49}\)"Fall Appeal," The Catholic Worker, November 1957, 2.

\(^{50}\)Cf. Searching for Christ, 193: "The experience of greater solitude had confirmed community and active service as essential components of Dorothy's own vocation. Yet, by the same token, it had verified Thérèse's vocation as a necessary complement."


\(^{52}\)Story of a Family, 443-53.

\(^{53}\)"Thérèse of Lisieux inspired Dorothy Day," 6.


\(^{55}\)The Long Loneliness, 147-48.

\(^{56}\)J. Michael McCloskey summarizes this aspect of the Worker credo as follows: "Personalism requires the reform of each person as a prerequisite to the reform of society as a whole... [E]ach person who can will take upon himself the moral responsibility of abandoning the industrial cities and of returning to the land—the land where things are green rather than black and filled with soot and where the family in God is a social unity once again." "The Catholic Worker Movement," The Catholic Worker 23/10 (May 1957), 4, italics added. Cf. Dorothy Day, The Long Loneliness, 179.

restoration of the family unit. Dorothy embraced personalism precisely in order to promote an integral view of the family, not "in spite of" her seemingly conventional views on the family. Even though Dorothy championed roles for women that were novel and bold, the traditional family unit, whose absence was lamentable in her own daughter's life, was an essential part of her social vision.

Dorothy intertwines her interest in Thérèse's family with the story of her own. In the preface to Thérèse, Dorothy connects the birth of her daughter Tamar Teresa with her first acquaintance with the French Carmelites. Dorothy lay in the maternity ward of Bellevue hospital in New York being clutched by "the tiny beautiful hands" of her baby daughter. The mother in the bed next to hers asked whether the child's second name came from the Little Flower. Dorothy, still not a Catholic and still instinctively superstitious of religion, confessed that she had known only of the saint from Avila. The woman, who was Catholic, offered Dorothy a medal of the Little Flower for the baby. When Dorothy shirked, the woman protested, "But if you love someone you want something around you to remind you of them." Then, Dorothy writes,

I took the medal, and after hearing of St. Thérèse as the young novice mistress in her far off convent of Lisieux in Normandy, who had died the year that I was born, and whose sisters were still alive, I decided that although I would name my child after the older saint, the new one would be my own Teresa's novice mistress, to train her in the spiritual life. I knew that I wanted to have the child baptized a Catholic and I wanted both saints to be taking care of her.

Dorothy wrote Thérèse out of her experience as a mother, a daughter, and a sister. Dorothy identified with Thérèse's family because she wanted to understand the integral meaning of the religion of the home. The family for Dorothy was not an instrument for social betterment. It is rather the first locus for the development of the natural tendency of every soul toward God: "The heart filled with love searches for someone on whom to bestow it."

In what sort of family was Thérèse raised? The extent of sheer piety in the Martin family is impressive. Both of Thérèse's parents had given serious thought to religious vocations. All of her four sisters eventually entered the Carmel of Lisieux. Thérèse's father, Louis Martin, was especially devout, attending Mass daily, taking Thérèse on several pilgrimages, and constantly reading to her from his favorite spiritual writers. Yet piety alone is not what attracted Dorothy to the Martin family. Responding to an anecdote in which Thérèse recounts her joy at being rocked to sleep by her father, Dorothy writes:

It is a happiness to read of this strong unashamed family love, so difficult for the Anglo-Saxon to express. Between Jansenism and the smattering of psychology that people as a whole have gone in for, grave and ugly accusations have been made in relation to family love, love between brother and sister, between father and daughter, mother and child.

The "strong unashamed family love" of the Martins embodied the personalist ideals that Dorothy and Peter Maurin were extolling in The Catholic Worker. For Dorothy, Thérèse's family is essentially a communion of persons, whose love for one another is expressed without inhibition or pretense. Dorothy continues:

The perversion of the best is rottenness indeed, and people of this day have looked down into the depths, the black depths of perverse love, and realizing its horror have fled from love expressed in tenderness. And yet the desire for love is so strong, the desire for tenderness is so inherent that there is a frank and unashamed seeking after sex as an opportunity to enjoy this all too human need of tenderness.

At the root of intense familial love, Dorothy discerned the same desires that had driven herself in her youth to embrace libertinism; however, the frank acknowledgment that all desire is essentially erotic need not cast a shadow over the integrity of the familial bonds. On the contrary, Dorothy applauds Thérèse's family (including her sisters) for sating the young child's unbounded hunger for intimacy and knowledge even while impressing upon the child the need to desire God above all things. The Martins "taught their children that it was a privilege to serve the unfortunate with their own hands and do the works
of mercy directly instead of doling out advice and pious admonitions."  

Lest one get the impression that Dorothy romanticized her portrait of the Martin family, consider the many tragic dimensions of their existence. Dorothy devotes a whole chapter to the death of Thérèse’s mother, Zélie Martin, which occurred when Thérèse was just four years old. Dorothy relates Thérèse’s account of the ceremony of Extreme Unction and the sadness and withdrawal that remained with her until she was fourteen. The care of Thérèse passed on to her second oldest sister, Pauline. When Thérèse was nine, Pauline left home to enter the Carmel in Lisieux. The sudden absence of her “little mother” triggered an emotional illness in the young Thérèse. More than just grief, Thérèse was plagued with severe headaches for almost two years. At one point her family thought that she was going to die, and her father sent an offering to a shrine in Paris asking that a novena of Masses be offered. Dorothy adds another dimension to Thérèse’s illness, one that has not been properly understood, she maintains, by theologians such as von Balthasar. Thérèse also suffered from “hypersensitiveness or scruples” until she was fourteen. For example, Thérèse describes heranguishedcompulsion to relate “every thought, every action, even the simplest” to her sister Marie as “a martyrdom.” As a newly professed Carmelite she had to endure from the age of sixteen to nineteen the illness that sent her beloved father to a mental hospital. In sum, the Martin children were not shielded from death and suffering: “The very fact that children come face to face with death and suffering, makes for that paradox, ‘rejoicing in tribulation,’ that the New Testament speaks of.”

Spiritually, the natural family is not an absolute. Dorothy recognized this when, after her entrance into the Catholic Church, her religious vocation forced her to leave behind the man she loved and the home she had created for herself and her daughter. Thérèse’s decision to enter the Carmel was not altogether dissimilar. Although founding houses of hospitality in New York City may seem a world away from cloistered life in Lisieux, in both cases the natural bond of love had to be severed in order to prepare for an intensification of their decisions to live their lives Godward. Thérèse knows this even though she would be joining her sisters Pauline and Marie in the convent: “No, I did not enter this blessed Carmel in order to live with my sisters. On the contrary, I foresaw clearly that this must be a source of great suffering when I was resolved to allow nothing to nature.”

What distinguishes Thérèse’s vocation from Dorothy’s (even more than the radicality of the cloister) is the intense support Thérèse had received from her natural family for her spiritual mission. Dorothy recounts the story of Thérèse’s oral plea to Pope Leo XIII during a pilgrimage to Rome to allow her to enter the Carmel before the minimum age. Her request was voiced despite strict orders from the priest leading the pilgrimage not to speak to the Holy Father during the private audience. Noting that her disobedience received the approbation of her father and sister Celine, Dorothy writes:

It was a case of obeying God rather than man, as St. Peter advised. He said also, “Servants, obey your masters.” It was more as though she was obeying her immediate superiors, her father and her two sisters [sic], as well as her own conscience.

In other words, Thérèse had to sacrifice the warm, secure domain of familial love in order to make Love loved from the frigid solitude of the cloister, yet Thérèse’s sacrifice was well prepared by the prior sacrifice made by her father and sisters.

The Martin family was a domestic Church, or even more precisely, “a vestibule for the cloister.” It was a regular home in which children played games, and petty jealousies arose. Its truly religious character lies less in the admirable intensity of the family’s piety than in the gradual de-privatization of self which it taught the young Thérèse. The home was marked by tragic instability and a social apostolate as well. The Martin home provided their children with a clarification of thought more radical than any communist cell could ever offer. In sum, the nexus of domestic relations was the first and indispensable

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65 Ibid., 30.
66 Ibid., 76.
67 Ibid., 98.
68 Ibid., 72.
69 The Long Loneliness, 140.
70 Autobiography, ch. 9, as cited in The Story of a Family, 450.
71 Thérèse, 120. Italics added.
72 Han Urs von Balthasar, Two Sisters in the Spirit: Thérèse of Lisieux & Elizabeth of the Trinity (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992), 145.
proving ground for Thérèse’s momentous decision to live her life “practicing the presence of God.”

III. Thérèse’s Spiritual Life: Nuptiality and Spiritual Childhood

After Thérèse entered the Carmel at age fifteen, she was able to fulfill her desire to live her life entirely towards God. The language with which she describes her development in the cloister is spontaneously composed and highly varied, as multifaceted as the images in Scripture and the spiritual writers, especially her fellow Carmelite St. John of the Cross. Not completely unlike a journalist, Thérèse recorded the story of her soul in an episodic, impressionistic, but not wholly random style. Certain clusters of images predominate and one theme. One focal image is that of nuptial love, i.e., not only the explicit invocations of Bride/Bridegroom imagery but also references to raptures of love, naked faith in love, and making Love loved.

Another set of images is that of the diminutives: the Little Way, the Little Flower, the plaything of Jesus, i.e., spiritual childhood. A central theme which connects these and other images is her faith in and dependence on God as Father.

Dorothy was fascinated by Thérèse’s use of nuptial language and cites an extended example taken from her description of the First Communion ceremony. One must keep in mind that the passage in question describes the experience of an eleven year old girl. Passages such as these caused von Balthasar to characterize Thérèse’s use of nuptial imagery as “empty” and “flat.”

Dorothy, on the other hand, plays her usual advocacy role in explicating the significance of the passage. Thérèse writes:

What comfort it brought to me, that first kiss our Lord imprinted on my soul! A lover’s kiss; I knew that I was loved, and I, in my turn, told him that I loved him, and was giving myself to him for all eternity ... Thérèse had simply disappeared, like a drop lost in the ocean; Jesus only was left, my

Master, my King. Hadn’t I begged him to take away my liberty, because I was so afraid of the use I might make of it; hadn’t I longed, weak and helpless as I was, to be united once for all with that divine Strength?

Despite her youth, the intensity with which she describes her attraction to the Bridegroom is characteristic of Thérèse’s style. Dorothy notes that others “have called attention to the sexual element in such language.” Here, and throughout Thérèse, Dorothy is determined to counter those who dismiss erotic theological language in purely reductive and psychological terms.

Can one lend credence to the gushings of such a young girl, especially one who, as von Balthasar protests, never had had a human suitor? Dorothy, mother and laywoman, answers: “One does not have to experience it to know what it means.” The nuptial language “draws upon the keenest and most intense love between men and women,” which, however, “is not dependent on sexual intercourse.” Referring to Old Testament bridal imagery and especially the Canticle of Canticles, Dorothy is convinced of the authenticity of Thérèse’s “raptures” and “transports.” They testify to the immanence of the divine gift. Dorothy knows that even when writing of her earliest spiritual experiences Thérèse struggled to seek the truth in everything, to purify the longings of her heart of illusory perceptions or child-like fantasies. “This ... was spoken in truth,” Dorothy concludes.

Dorothy also knew that enlightened scepticism often greets Thérèse’s language of spiritual childhood. In addition to the diminutives mentioned above, Thérèse refers to herself as a little ball which the child Jesus played with or tossed aside:

Jesus riddles me with pin pricks ... The poor little ball can take no more; all over it are tiny holes which cause it more suffering than if it had but one

75On Thérèse’s approach to Scripture, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, Two Sisters in the Spirit, 81-96.
76Dorothy compares Thérèse to a newspaper reporter working on an assignment. Thérèse, 144.
78Hans Urs von Balthasar, Two Sisters in the Spirit, 125.
79Thérèse, 84-85. For other references to nuptiality, see ibid., 105, 149-50, 155. This passage can be found in the newly edited Sainte Thérèse de l’Enfant-Jésus et de la Sainte Face, Histoire d’une Ame, manuscripts autobiographiques (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1996), 81.
80Thérèse, 85.
81Ibid., 7, 17. Robert Coles reports the following statement made by Dorothy Day about Sigmund Freud: “I heard about his ideas all the time when I was young, but when faced with a choice between him and a novel, I always chose the novel as a way to learn psychology” (Robert Coles, Dorothy Day. A Radical Devotion [Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1987], 170, n.13).
82Thérèse, 85 for this and what follows.
83Ibid., 109.
great gash... If He does not Himself pierce His little ball, it is He who guides the hand that pierces it.  

By contemporary standards, the use of such deliberately self-deprecating language would be quickly labeled unhealthy. Dorothy parries the assumed critique with Thérèse's own explanation: "It is the way of spiritual childhood," she said in response to a question about her 'Little Way.' "It is the path of total abandonment and confidence."  

Thérèse was "confident" that nothing mattered so much in this life as receiving God's love for us. According to Dorothy, Thérèse entered the convent startledly mature for her age. Her Little Ways are not an infliction of self-punishment or the reflection of diminished self-worth. She ardently and consciously desires to create a space in her soul, in her life, for God's passionate love. Rather than submitting to the rigor of an arbitrary master, Thérèse's volitional self-diminution takes its cue from the self-abasement of Love itself. Specifically, Thérèse claims that the following words from Isaiah 53:2-3 are the words with which she interpreted the face of Jesus on Veronica's veil and are the basis of her entire spirituality:

Despised and most abject of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with infirmity; and his look was, as it were, hidden and despised, whereupon we esteemed him not.

Thérèse explains her attraction to the face of sorrows: "I too desire to be without glory or beauty, to tread the winepress alone, unknown to any creature." In other words, Thérèse deliberately hid in her Little Way. To express the earnestness of her love for the bridegroom, she chose the language least likely to be abstracted into a preconceived system, the language of child's play.

The language of spiritual childhood is paradoxical language of a very distinct sort. Kierkegaard saw the paradoxical language rooted in the antithesis between God and man. Thérèse embraces receptivity but eschews Kierkegaard's dialectics in order to adopt a fundamentally Marian stance. The virgin birth is the interpretative lens through which she views the incongruity between God's unlimited love and her own little deeds. Her diminutives are meant to highlight the enormity of the divine self-emptying. Because God died in the form of a slave, she too could, indeed must imitate at the center of her daily life the "incomprehensible condescension" of the Spouse.

This brings us back to her love for God the Father. Once again, Dorothy meets psychological reductionism squarely:

It is partly because of this father, who played so great a role in her life, that she was what she was. When she told of her Little Way of dependence on God's merciful love she was thinking, too, of her dearly beloved father.

In spite of her intense experience of paternal human love, Thérèse harbors no confusion about the qualitative difference between God the Father and Louis Martin. Real paternal love nurtured her and guided her right up to the convent door, but when she turns within to measure the immensity of God's love there is no projection of her pious Dad. Given the early death of her mother, Dorothy wonders whether the mature Thérèse's love of God the Father may be akin to what Julian of Norwich (another holy woman featured in The Catholic Worker) called father-mother love. By enfolding maternal affection within the embrace of paternal love Thérèse would be accentuating, as Julian did, the humanity of Christ:

One can only go to the Father through Jesus, so she not only spoke of herself as Spouse of Christ, as all nuns are, but also as the playfellow, the plaything, even, of the Child Jesus. Her familiarity with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit might be called her recognition of the immanence of God, and this very familiarity which leads her to liken herself to a little plaything, a ball, a little grain of dust to be trampled underfoot, points to God's transcendence, to the infinite distance between God and creatures. On the one hand He is closer than the air we breathe, and on the

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84Ibid., 130.
85Ibid., 166.
86Ibid., 150.
87Ibid., 166. On Thérèse's devotion to the sacred face of Jesus, see Balthasar, Two Sisters in the Spirit, 221ff.
88Thérèse, 166.

81Histoire d'une âme, 155.
82Thérèse, 7.
83Ibid., 147.
other hand we are the grain of sand on the seashore, lost in the nothingness before the All Powerful.

Psychologically, a projection is extrapolated from the human qualities of a parent who is either desired or feared but never attainable. Thérèse's love for the Father inverts the direction of the projected desire. Rather than positing known attributes on an unknown, desired being, she grants the unknowability of infinite love as the very condition for the experience of being receptive to that love. Rather than controlling her desire through the mechanisms of involuntary restraint, Thérèse's love for God's unlimitedness frees her to be received into the divine embrace. Her self-diminution is simply a sincere attempt to widen the expanson of her life in the infinite God.

IV. "Love is a Science"

Thérèse is the only full-length study of a Catholic saint published by Dorothy Day. Dorothy incorporated Thérèse into her apostolic activity not so her followers would be edified by the story of a pious Catholic. Her view of sanctity was both broader and more profound. The saint, she states, is "the holy man, the 'whole man,' the integrated man."

Thérèse includes the elements for "developing our spiritual capacities" and learning how to "grow in love." Dorothy states in the preface that love is a "science, a knowledge," which we lack. What, exactly, is the science of love in Thérèse?

Dorothy does not mean that Thérèse's Little Way can be translated into a formal system of axioms along the lines of the modern natural sciences. She is referring to the fact that the person who acts out of love does so consciously and intentionally. Love is not a mere emotion, a temporary reprieve from the dominance of technical reason in modern society. The habitual activity of love demands wisdom, and the logic which governs practical wisdom admits of rigorous, philosophical scrutiny.

A lesson about the science of love can drawn from the French philosopher Maurice Blondel. Dorothy praises Thérèse for her practice of "naked, blind charity." According to Blondel the logic of love is based upon an insuperable privation. Consider the example of caring for the sick, a task Thérèse was frequently called to undertake in the Carmel. Viewed from the perspective of purely formal relations, such acts of charity are riddled with contradictions: Why work rather than pray? Why heal this nun rather than another? Why work in the cloister rather than a public hospital? The finite determination to serve one particular person seems to negate other good actions. The paradoxical character of moral action, Blondel argues, is distinct from the logic of formal relations. According to the principle of non-contradiction which governs formal logic, to say, for example, that Sr. Marie is the one to be served is to negate the service of Sr. Pauline. Blondel's point is that the perceived formal negation is just an inadequate symbol of something else. For the moral life privation is more fundamental than formal negation. All moral action is marked by privation because finite acts are ordered to an end which can never be transcended. In choosing one action, we are excluding others, both good and bad. The accomplishment of a desired end (e.g., Sr. Marie is healed) does not change the intrinsically privative character of the original action. Even though one can will an infinite number of desired ends (healing all the sick, praying for universal salvation, etc.), human volition in actuality always misses the mark. Blondel isolates both an infinite desire to fulfill charity's unlimited demands and the ineluctable finitude of freedom, even freedom aimed right at love itself.

Blondel's analysis of the structure of the charitable act confirms the necessity of the Little Way. If one confuses the privative character of moral action with the negativity of logical contradiction, then the world's suffering appears either

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94 Ibid., 147-48.
95 Ibid., vii for this and what follows.
97 Blondel was twelve years older than Thérèse. His major work Action 1 (1893) came out while Thérèse was in the Carmel of Lisieux. Thérèse had no interest in philosophy. She was interested in reading only Scripture and spiritual writers. Blondel, on the other hand, was very influenced by Christian spiritual writers, including St. Bernard and those in the Carmelite tradition. The point of this comparison is to show how Blondel's distinctions explicate the philosophical dimension of Thérèse's life and writings. My thesis is that Blondel pursued philosophy, as it were, in accordance with the Little Way.
98 Thérèse, 105.
completely insoluble ("every man for himself") or redeemable only in terms of large-scale projects and heroic deeds. Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin abhorred social planning (of either the communist or capitalist variety) as a response to human degradation precisely because it apotheosized the human will and accomplished ambiguous results in the realm of personal well being in the process. The Little Way acknowledges the limited character and logical indispensability of personal deeds as such. Thérèse embraced "little virtues" recognizing both her individual incapacity to alleviate human suffering and her real participation in the circulation of Love itself.

This science of love is especially evident in the Carmelite life of work. Dorothy, an oblate of St. Benedict, was very aware of the importance of manual labor in the monastic life. She paints a picture of the nuns' labors that is realistic but not wholly grim. They rinsed clothes in the freezing Norman winters with badly chapped hands. Illness and even death were commonplace. Fatigue was the greatest enemy. In spite of these grave physical burdens, Thérèse was still allowed leisure time. She undertook extensive spiritual reading, including all of the works of St. John of the Cross. She also engaged in mural painting, story telling, and noteworthy poetry. Dorothy appears impressed that Thérèse was a delightful mimic. Knowing that many of her readers were unfamiliar with monastic life, Dorothy notes that all work was structured around the most important opus Dei, the six or seven hours of daily communal prayer. Meals were regulated by the monastic rule, and fasting was prescribed from September 14 to Easter. Dorothy depicts her situation with the detail of a pointillist:

Thérèse experienced these and other privations. Her habit was of coarse seige, her stockings of rough muslin, and on her feet she wore rope sandals. Her bed was made of three planks, covered by a thin pad and one woolen blanket. There was scarcity of food, inadequate bedding, no heat in the convent except for one small stove in one room. Prayer and penance! These are indeed spiritual works, spiritual weapons to save souls, penance for luxury when the destitute suffer, a work to increase the sum total of love and peace in the world. Thérèse’s little deeds were actually burdensome, time-consuming, and often boring. She gravitated towards undesirable tasks not out of a need for self-punishment but out of a conviction that virtue is comprised of such little things. When influenza struck the convent, the number of such little tasks was enormous. Fulfillment of one left still many more unattended. Dorothy underscores the love with which Thérèse invested each individual act. As Blondel noted, each deed is a privation; each favor bestowed a gift. Work of every kind was imbued with a spiritual meaning and thereby utterly dignified.

The theology of work in Thérèse carries with it a significance that extends beyond the cloister. Americans typically have their work measured by the size of individual performance. In the workplace what counts are big achievements and public recognition. Promotion is based upon familiar adages like “Maximize your output!” “Bring in a lot of clients!” “Do great things for the company!” or (to quote the watchword of the theologians’ guild) “Publish or perish!” Quiet acts of virtue are not wholly ignored but are best relegated to the private realm of the home. By contrast, Thérèse offers an implicit critique of all attempts to measure human action by the sole criterion of performance. This lesson applied to the whole of The Catholic Worker’s apostolate. Dorothy worked to establish houses of hospitality not simply to complement the calculus of achievement that dominates the American workplace, for the Catholic Worker houses are more than a safety net for the temporarily displaced. Like the Carmel at Lisieux, they are intended to force the world to reckon with the absolute priority of the personal. Likewise, Dorothy highlights the joy which Thérèse found in her chores, for she knew first hand of the dreariness and despair workers feel when their work is not

101 Thérèse, 140-46.
102 The impact of monasticism on Dorothy's spirituality is treated incisively in O'Shea Merriman, Searching for Christ, 73-139. In the late forties and early fifties, as the Thérèse project was germinating, Dorothy seems to have been favorably impressed with the presentation of the Benedictine theology of work expounded by Br. Rembert Sorg, O.S.B. (Ibid., 105-6).
103 Thérèse, 164.
appreciated and remunerated as an indispensable contribution to a free community of persons.

Thérèse’s pedagogy of love also explains her unflinching commitment to acts of mortification. Dorothy highlighted not only the suffering borne by Thérèse but also her forthright receptivity to suffering. As the tuberculosis advanced, and the bones began protruding through the skin, her superior wished that her pain would end. Thérèse answered, "You ought not to say that, little Mother, because to suffer is exactly what pleases me in life." By itself, that utterance would in the eyes of some jeopardize the legitimacy of the Little Way entirely. Yet it is in fact consistent with her daily attempt to teach the science of love. Mortification was never externally imposed upon Thérèse. She embraced the opportunity to make sacrifices and even volunteered at one point to become a missionary in Hanoi. Dreams of martyrdom were not unknown to her either. Thérèse writes:

When I say mortification, I do not mean the sort of penance the saints undertake. I was not like those grand souls who practice all kinds of penance from childhood. My mortification consisted in checking my self-will, keeping back an impatient word, doing little things for those around me without their knowing it, and countless things like that.

For Thérèse each act of mortification is a living symbol of charity. It was a self-emptying purely for the sake of others without anyone knowing that an imitation of the divine kenosis was taking place. She liked to hide her virtue and would have kept it a secret from God himself if that were possible.

In his philosophy of action, Blondel treated mortification as the way of our assimilation to God. Blondel’s thesis is predicated on the fundamental distinction between mortification and punishment. Mortification is motivated purely by love. In mortification there is no pessimism, nor a shred of disdain for the materiality of creation and the onerous conditions to which life binds us. Even though acts of mortification appear to force one to

turn away from the world, they are still woven into the very fabric of human life and human love. Blondel maintained that God is "reborn" in the creature through mortification and that mortification "is in many respects the key to everything and the center of the perspective that is Christian and total."

In Blondel’s analysis, God gives every creature a loan of being. Depending upon how we employ the gift, we may receive an even greater gift. As the parable of the pearl of great price shows, the gift must be given up entirely in order to receive a greater gift. Since the gift is truly given, what we give up is in a real sense ours. The freedom of the creature is nothing other than the giftedness of the gift. The act whereby we freely give up the gift is the coming to be of God in us. For Blondel definition is the end of mortification:

God has withdrawn himself and has relinquished a part of the divine domain so that it is up to us to restore it to God, or not. To give up our initial loan of being is to restore it to God, to restore God’s sovereignty; it is to allow God to be in us.

Thérèse’s mortification is a living icon of “the wondrous exchange” between God and humanity. Mortification in The Story of a Soul is the subjective state whereby Thérèse participates in the enactment of the truth that God became man in order for man to become God.

Blondel hits upon the key to Thérèse’s approach to suffering. She was pleased to suffer because each little act was a microcosmic theogony. The womb out of which God became flesh in her life was knit out of little virtues of mortification. It follows from Blondel’s analysis that Thérèse’s relationship to God was not in the first instance one of friendship. The union was strictly nuptial; her flesh blends into Christ’s wounded body.

**Conclusion**

The story of St. Thérèse of Lisieux was woven from a domestic and devotional life shared not only by French Catholics
of the nineteenth century. Thérèse is a pioneering study of what contemporary Latino theologians in the United States call religiosidad popular or popular Catholicism. For Dorothy too, Thérèse “was one of the people.” She had no special status in French society, yet upon her death was venerated around the world as one of the masses. Dorothy Day’s own interest in Thérèse was hardly academic. Much like all popular Catholicism, it started with the material transmission of a specific devotional item from one woman to another, viz., the medal given to her in the maternity ward. This gesture goaded Dorothy to learn that the Little Way is not only accessible to all but has concrete, universal appeal.

Dorothy had boundless faith in the efficacy of the Little Way. She knew that Thérèse’s mission of prayer was eschatological and regularly called upon the saint to support her apostolic efforts. Dorothy was so convinced of the power of the Little Way that she likened its impact to the spiritual equivalent of an atomic bomb:

The seeds of this teaching are being spread, being broadcast, to be watered by our blood perhaps, but with a promise of a harvest. God will give the increase. At a time when there are such grave fears because of the radioactive particles that are sprinkled over the world by the hydrogen bomb tests, and the question is asked, what effect they are going to have on the physical life of the universe, one can state that this saint, of this day, is releasing a force, a spiritual force, upon the world to counteract that fear and that disaster. We know that one impulse of grace is of infinitely more power than a cobalt bomb. Thérèse has said, “All is grace.”

These words must be read not as elaborate metaphor or mere exhortation but as testimony to a real impulse that Dorothy


117 Thérèse, 83.

118 Ibid., 175. Dorothy may have been imitating the following words of Georges Bernanos when she made this comparison: “Every particle of Christ’s divine charity is today more precious for your security—for your security, I say—than all the atom bombs in all the stockpiles” (Dorothy Day, Selected Writings, ed. Robert Ellisburg [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992], 100).

received through the Little Flower to persevere with her apostolate of protesting the culture of death.

Balthasar thought that Thérèse’s spirituality might be a trifle too subjective. Even though the saint centered her life on the all-consuming gift of grace there is a still tendency in her writings to overemphasize the dramatic infamy of her own soul. Many important aspects of the Church’s witness to the truth and even the full trinitarian dimensions of the contemplative life receive short shrift. One suspects that Balthasar might make a similar comment about the religious autobiography of Dorothy Day.

On the other hand, this “subjective” standpoint to Christian faith may constitute exactly the type of religious pedagogy that the contemporary world demands. Both women use their own stories as tangible, didactic examples of God’s dramatic intrusion into their ordinary, far from perfect lives. Neither focus on achieving degrees of spiritual progress. Both speak to the material and spiritual poverty of modern subjectivism and offer practical lessons drawn from the little stories of the Gospel on how to purify the Promethean will of modern women and men. Neither Thérèse nor Dorothy was interested in constructing large edifices of thought akin to the Gothic cathedrals or scholastic systems. Their theology was that of the ancient Christians taking refuge in the catacombs, the masses for the Solidarity union said in the shipyards of Gdansk, or the home altars of contemporary Hispanic Catholics. They both achieved an integration of theology and sanctity that could make a significant contribution to theological renewal today, for their lives and writings exemplify and were founded upon the “little stories” of popular religion that “make possible the ‘Big Story’ of the church and her faith.”

119 Hans Urs von Balthasar, Two Sisters in the Spirit, 11. But see also My Work in Retrospect (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 33, in which Thérèse is presented as a necessary counterweight to the grandiose subjectivity of the Great Teresa and the spiritual radicalism of John of the Cross.

120 Bauerschmidt, following Bernard Bro, highlights Thérèse’s modernism: “The Little Flower finds her place among the masters of suspicion [e.g., Freud, Marx, Nietzsche]; she, as much as they, confronts the abyss that strips away all prior securities” (Frederick Bauerschmidt, “The Politics of the Little Way,” 83).

121 Ibid., 84.

122 Alex Garcia-Rivera, St. Martin de Porres, 21.
Thérèse wrote in the context of the militant atheism of late nineteenth century France. Dorothy preached to twentieth century Americans of the powerful and destructive structures in society which de-personalized social bonds and left women and men spiritually parched. Both women witnessed to Christ in a world in which social and religious “idealism” was rampant but tragically detached from real problems in people’s lives. Their realism follows the model of “doing the truth” that we find in the Johannine tradition.\(^{123}\) Dorothy and Thérèse were both tireless seekers of the truth, but neither of them rested content with abstract formulae. The doing of the truth rested not on arid speculation or personal achievement but rather their virtual inversion. The more immersed these women became in the daily work of charity, the easier it became to write— itself a theo-logical labor—the truth that all is grace. Armed with this knowledge, they were compelled to disseminate it as broadly as possible. In Dorothy’s words, “one impulse of grace is of infinitely more power than a cobalt bomb.”


*This essay is dedicated to my grandmother Teresita, a child of the Little Flower.*