

WHAT IT MEANS TO LOVE IN THE HEART OF THE CHURCH

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In the heart of the church I will be love

Since my longing for martyrdom was powerful and unsettling, I turned to the epistles of Saint Paul in the hope of finally finding an answer. By chance the twelfth and thirteenth chapters of the first epistle to the Corinthians caught my attention, and in the first section I read that not everyone can be an Apostle, prophet or teacher, that the Church is composed of a variety of members, and that the eye cannot be the hand. Even with such an answer revealed before me, I was not satisfied and did not find peace.

I persevered in the reading and did not let my mind wander until I found this encouraging theme: *Set your desires on the greater gifts. And I will show you the way which surpasses all others.* For the Apostle insists that the greater gifts are nothing at all without love and that this same love is surely the best path leading directly to God. At length I had found peace of mind.

When I had looked upon the mystical body of the Church, I recognized myself in none of the members which Saint Paul described, and what is more, I desired to distinguish myself more favorably within the whole body. Love appeared to me to be the hinge for my vocation. Indeed I knew that the Church had a body composed of various members, but in this body the necessary and more noble member was not lacking; I knew that the Church had a heart and that such a heart appeared to be aflame with love. I knew that one love drove the members of the Church to action, that if this love were extinguished, the Apostles would have proclaimed the Gospel no longer, the martyrs would have shed their blood no more. I saw and realized that love sets off the bounds of all vocations, that love is everything, that this same love embraces every time and every place. In one word, that love is everlasting.

Then, nearly ecstatic with the supreme joy in my soul, I proclaimed: O Jesus, my love, at last I have found my calling: my call is love. Certainly I have found my place in the Church, and You gave me that very place, my God. In the heart of the Church, my mother, I will be love, and thus I will be all things, as my desire finds its direction.

—Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus, virgin and doctor
Office of Readings, 1 October

First of all, we find a special charism of wisdom. This young Carmelite, without any particular theological training, but illumined by the light of the Gospel, feels she is being taught by the divine Teacher who, as she says, is "the Doctor of Doctors" (*Ms A*, 83v), and from him she receives "divine teachings" (*Ms B*, 1r). She feels that the words of Scripture are fulfilled in her: "Whoever is a little one, let him come to me.... For to him that is little, mercy shall be shown" (*Ms B*, 1v; cf. Prv 9:4; Wis 6:6) and she knows she is being instructed in the science of love, hidden from the wise and prudent, which the divine Teacher deigned to reveal to her, as to babes (*Ms A*, 49r; cf. Lk 10:21-22).¹

Thus we can rightly recognize in the Saint of Lisieux the charism of a Doctor of the Church, because of the gift of the Holy Spirit she received for living and expressing her experience of faith, and because of her particular understanding of the mystery of Christ. In her are found the gifts of the new law, that is, the grace of the Holy Spirit, who manifests himself in living faith working through charity (cf. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theol.*, I-II, q. 106, art. 1; q. 108, art. 1).²



Religious Vocation

St. Therese was essentially a contemplative. Therese was truly consumed by divine love. Her desires knew no limits; her ardor constantly increased and she suffered a "veritable martyrdom" of love. Not satisfied with being a Carmelite, a bride of Jesus, a mother of souls, she would have liked to have all vocations, to accomplish the most heroic deeds and shed her blood to the last drop so that Jesus might be loved by men.

Because of the spiritual pains which her zeal caused her to suffer, she opened the epistles of St. Paul, hoping to find in them counsel and comfort during her martyrdom. She came upon Chapter 12 of the First Epistle to the Corinthians and read there that the Body of the Church necessarily comprises several members, each having its own special function. But this was not all gifts, even the most perfect, that are distributed to the various members, are valueless unless they are animated by love and that charity is the great way that leads securely to God.

This time she understood. She realized that the Church is a Mystical Body composed of diverse members, diverse organs. It must have a heart, a heart burning with love, as with us; it is the heart of the Mystical Body which has the function of giving life and energy for action to the other members.³

From that moment she saw clearly her own vocation. Since love is everything and contains all vocations, she had only one thing to do: to love. This would enable her to give to Jesus all that He desired. Hence, she exclaimed in an ecstasy of joy: *"O Jesus, I have finally discovered my vocation. My vocation is LOVE. . . In the Heart of my mother, the Church, it shall be my function to love. In this way I shall be able to be all things, to have all vocations."*⁴

It was after Sept. 8, 1896, probably on the 14th of the month, that Therese discovered this "vocation"; for it is truly a vocation and not merely a way of pleasing God. Throughout her life she had given God nothing but love. All her conduct was inspired by love. She had even offered herself as a victim to merciful Love so that she might love God with His own love. What Therese was looking for was the kind of role she ought to play in the Church. She wanted to find the means of so loving God and causing Him to be loved that it would be equivalent to the task of all other apostolic laborers and all vocations.

By loving God with the love to which she had offered herself, the love which, from that moment had possessed her heart, she would render to God love for love and fulfill all vocations. "Is not the smallest movement of pure love more useful to the Church," wrote St. John of the Cross, 'than the sum total of all other works?

All true love of Christ is apostolic; it generates zeal. Hence, at the moment when her love reached an exceptional degree of fervor, Therese's thoughts turned towards souls. She prayed Jesus to reveal to other souls the secret of His love, to choose for Him a legion of souls who would walk her own little way and become victims of divine love. Their imperfection would not be an obstacle. Even if they were weaker and more insignificant than herself, they would be even better suited for the action of merciful Love, provided they abandoned themselves to Him with complete docility and full confidence.

At this stage of her life, Therese understood better than ever before that love is everything, that "it makes up for everything, even for a long life" in this land of trial, that when a soul is truly delivered to love, all its actions, even the most insignificant, are marked with the divine zeal.⁵

At the beginning of her religious life, she had written to Celine: *"There is only one thing for us to do during the night of this life; to love, to love Jesus with all the strength of our heart, and to save souls for Him that he may be loved. Oh! The joy of causing Jesus to be loved!"*⁶

The experiences of religious life served but to confirm her intuitions and the truth of the words of her spiritual Father. She had experienced the value of love, because she had tasted it and lived it.

Living the Little Way of love in Community

"There is in Community a Sister who has the faculty of displeasing me in everything, in her ways, her

words, her character, everything seems very disagreeable to me. And still she is a holy religious who must be very pleasing to God. Not wishing to give in to the natural antipathy I was experiencing, I told myself that charity must not consist in feelings but in works; then I set myself to doing for this Sister what I would do for the person I loved the most. Each time I met her I prayed to God for her, offering Him all her virtues and merits..."

"The light of Easter and Pentecost have renewed in us each year the joy and wonder of faith that recognizes that God is not something vague, abstract, but has a name: 'God is love, And this love "is not sentimental, emotional, but the love of the Father who is the source of all life, the love of the Son who died on the cross and rose, the love of the Spirit who renews man and the world,""

"I wasn't content simply with praying very much for this Sister who gave me so many struggles, but I took care to render her all the services possible, and when I was tempted to answer her back in a disagreeable manner, I was content with "

1. Giving her my most friendly smile, and with
2. Changing the subject of the conversation...

One day at recreation she asked in almost these words: "Would you tell me, Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus, what attracts you so much towards me; every time you look at me, I see you smile?" Ah! What attracted me was Jesus hidden in the depths of her soul." (Chapter 10, Clarke 222-223)

"I see now that true charity consists in:

1. Bearing with the faults of those about us,
2. Never being surprised at their weaknesses,
3. But edified at the least sign of virtue.

I see above all that charity must not remain hidden in the bottom of our hearts: 'nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand and it gives light to all in the house.' It seems to me that this lamp is the symbol of charity; it must shine out not only to cheer those we love best but all in the house" ("The Autobiography of a Saint", Chapter 9).

She then lived fraternal love even more intensely (8r-33v): for the sisters in her community, for her two spiritual missionary brothers, for the priests and for all people, especially the most distant. She truly became a 'universal sister'! Her lovable, smiling charity was the expression of the profound joy whose secret she reveals: "Jesus, my joy is loving you" (P 45/7). In this context of suffering, living the greatest love in the smallest things of daily life, the Saint brought to fulfillment her vocation to be love in the heart of the Church (cf. Ms B, 3v).⁸

To be witnesses to love is a most excellent vocation, more so during our times, but also a vocation that demands the generous disposition to elevate our hearts to a love capable of giving itself to the extreme, capable of transforming all of our interior being to shine luminously in the middle of the darkness of a culture that has strayed away from love.⁹

In the heart of the Church, I will be love

"At last I have found my vocation. In the heart of the Church, I will be Love!"

St. Therese simply discovered the common vocation of all of us, she found her own particular special vocation and the universal vocation common to all of us. The special calling of St. Thérèse consists precisely in her giving herself completely to that which is the fundamental vocation of us all--to live in love. Most of us are not called to live the vocation of love in the same way as she did--as a Carmelite devoted to contemplation and the intense expression of love in little things--but her vocation has something to show every one of us about our own unique vocation.

Universal Call to Holiness in the Church

39. The Church, whose mystery is being set forth by this Sacred Synod, is believed to be indefectibly holy. Indeed Christ, the Son of God, who with the Father and the Spirit is praised as "uniquely holy," (1*) loved the Church as His bride, delivering Himself up for her. He did this that He might sanctify her. (214) He united her to Himself as His own body and brought it to perfection by the gift of the Holy Spirit for God's glory. Therefore in the Church, everyone whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness, according to the saying of the Apostle: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification" (215) However, this holiness of the Church is unceasingly manifested, and must be manifested, in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful; it is expressed in many ways in individuals, who in their walk of life, tend toward the perfection of charity, thus causing the edification of others; in a very special way this (holiness) appears in the practice of the counsels, customarily called "evangelical." This practice of the counsels, under the impulsion of the Holy Spirit, undertaken by many Christians, either privately or in a Church-approved condition or state of life, gives and must give in the world an outstanding witness and example of this same holiness.¹⁰

40. The Lord Jesus, the divine Teacher and Model of all perfection, preached holiness of life to each and every one of His disciples of every condition. He Himself stands as the author and consumator of this holiness of life: "Be you therefore perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect" (216)(2*) Indeed He sent the Holy Spirit upon all men that He might move them inwardly to love God with their whole heart and their whole soul, with all their mind and all their strength(217) and that they might love each other as Christ loves them.(218) The followers of Christ are called by God, not because of their works, but according to His own purpose and grace. They are justified in the Lord Jesus, because in the baptism of faith they truly become sons of God and sharers in the divine nature. In this way they are really made holy. Then too, by God's gift, they must hold on to and complete in their lives this holiness they have received. They are warned by the Apostle to live "as becomes saints" (219) and to put on "as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved a heart of mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, patience" (220) and to possess the fruit of the Spirit in holiness.(221) Since truly we all offend in many things (222) we all need God's mercies continually and we all must daily pray: "Forgive us our debts" (223)(3*).¹¹

*This is our charism, the charism of allowing the power of love to triumph in our hearts, in the Heart of the Church and in the Heart of the World. We must be witnesses to love: to divine and human love. The brilliance of human love can be witnessed in the heart who has experienced its beauty, its power and its Splendor; it can be witnessed in the heart that allows itself to be elevated by divine love, the heart that understands the profound unity of divine love and human love. That is why our hearts must be elevated, purified and transformed in His love so as to manifest through us, through our human love the power of His divine love.*¹²

Her Own Words on the Call to Love

Her desire to live all vocations

To be your Spouse, O Jesus, to be a Carmelite, by my union with you to be the mother of souls, should content me... yet it does not... Without doubt, these three privileges are indeed my vocation: Carmelite, spouse, and mother. And yet I feel in myself other vocations—I feel myself called to be a soldier, priest, apostle, doctor of the church, martyr. Finally, I feel the need, the desire to perform all the most heroic deeds for you, Jesus... I feel in my soul the courage of a crusader, of a soldier for the Church, and I wish to die on the field of battle in defense of the Church...

Dreaming of the tortures in which Christians are to share at the time of the Antichrist, I feel my heart thrill, and I would like these tortures to be kept for me... Jesus, Jesus, if I wanted to write all my desires, I would have to take your Book of Life, where the deeds of your saints are recorded: all these deeds I would like to accomplish for you.

The core of her message is actually the mystery itself of God-Love, of the Triune God, infinitely perfect in himself. If genuine Christian spiritual experience should conform to the revealed truths in which God communicates himself and the mystery of his will (cf. *Dei Verbum*, n. 2), it must be said that Thérèse experienced divine revelation, going so far as to contemplate the fundamental truths of our faith united in the mystery of Trinitarian life. At the summit, as the source and goal, is the merciful love of the three Divine

Persons, as she expresses it, especially in her *Act of Oblation to Merciful Love*. At the root, on the subject's part, is the experience of being the Father's adoptive children in Jesus; this is the most authentic meaning of spiritual childhood, that is, the experience of divine filiation, under the movement of the Holy Spirit. At the root again, and standing before us, is our neighbour, others, for whose salvation we must collaborate with and in Jesus, with the same merciful love as his.

Through spiritual childhood one experiences that everything comes from God, returns to him and abides in him, for the salvation of all, in a mystery of merciful love. Such is the doctrinal message taught and lived by this Saint.¹³

To be love in the heart of the Church

I am a child... It is not riches or glory (not even the glory of Heaven) that this child asks for... No, she asks for Love. She knows but one desire: to love you, Jesus. Glorious deeds are forbidden her; she cannot preach the Gospel or shed her blood... But what does that matter, her brothers work in her place, and she, a little child, stays close to the throne of the King and Queen, and loves for her brothers who are in the combat... But how shall she show her love, since love proves itself by deeds? Well! the little child will strew flowers, she will embalm the royal throne with their fragrance, she will sing with a silver voice the canticle of Love.

Yes, my Beloved, I wish to spend my life thus... I have no other means of proving my love except by strewing flowers, that is to say, letting no little sacrifice pass, no look, no word--profiting by the slightest actions, and doing them out of love. I wish to suffer out of love and to rejoice out of love; thus I shall strew flowers before your throne. I shall not find one without scattering its petals before you... and in strewing my flowers I will sing (can one weep in doing so joyous an action?) I will sing, even if my roses must be gathered from among thorns; and the longer and sharper the thorns, the sweeter shall be my song.

St. Therese and the universal vocation to love

These words of St. Thérèse are often cited as explaining the common vocation of all persons. Every person is called to love, and finds his fulfillment in love. And yet St. Thérèse seems to consider that she has found her *specific* vocation in love. Some persons are called to be eyes for the Church, others to be hands, others to be feet... her place is in the Church's heart. Some are called to be teachers, some healers, some helpers... she is called to be a lover.

Is there a contradiction between these two ways of understanding? Do we have to choose, and say either that love is the common vocation of us all, or that it is the special vocation of St. Thérèse, and perhaps some other Carmelites? Is her little way of love really possible and meaningful for those who cannot devote themselves to her way of life, for those who have a family, and cannot be a "spouse of Christ" etc.?

These two ways of understanding the "vocation to love" are not contradictory. Indeed, they are complementary: the vocation to love as a specific vocation presupposes, builds, and expresses the vocation to love as a common vocation. Thérèse's *specific* vocation consists precisely in devoting her life in an exemplary manner to that which is *common* to every vocation, to that which is the root and the heart of every vocation... to love. She makes love her profession, as it were.

By devotedly herself absolutely to love alone, she shows forth more clearly that this love is the essential point for *all* Christians, and ought to be the center and wellspring of all Christian life. The fundamental meaning of every vocation is a love story that unfolds between God and the person whom he calls. Thus, St. Thérèse, by demonstrating with her own life the central place of love for all men and women, performs a specific function for Christ and for the Church. The universal vocation to love is the foundation for St. Thérèse's special vocation to be a living model and teacher of such love. Her little way is both her own unique vocation, and is a way that can be followed by anyone, whatever his or her vocation his.

Therese on Love

Love Alone Counts

"I understand so very well that it is only through love that we can render ourselves pleasing to the good Lord, that love is the one thing I long for. The science of love is the only science I desire."

"I know of no other means to reach perfection than by love. To love: how perfectly our hearts are made for this! Sometimes I look for another word to use, but, in this land of exile, no other word so well expresses the vibrations of our soul. Hence we must keep to that one word: love."

"Merit does not consist in doing or giving much. It consists in loving much."

"How easy it is to please Jesus, to ravish His Heart. We have merely to love Him, while, at the same time, forgetting ourselves."

"Directors make people advance in perfection by performing a great number of acts of virtue, and they are right. But my Director, who is Jesus Himself, teaches me to do everything through love."

"The *only* good is to love God with all one's heart and to be here below *poor* in spirit..." (MS A, 32v, OC 121)

"There is but one thing for us to do in the night of this life and that is to love, to love Jesus with all the energy of our heart and to save souls so that He may be loved by them. O let us cause Jesus to be loved by men!"

"It is love alone that counts."

What is Love - How to Love

"You know it, O my God, to love you on earth/ I have nothing but to-day." (PN 5, stanza 1, OC 645)

"To live out of love means to banish all fear/ Every memory of past faults. / I see no mark of my sins, / In a moment love burnt everything." (PN 17, stanza 6, OC 668)

"We have merely to love Him, without looking at ourselves, without examining our faults too much."

"Justice itself, and justice even more than any other divine perfection, seems to me to be clothed in love."

"A glance of love cast towards Jesus and the knowledge of our profound misery makes reparation for everything."

"I assure you that the good Lord is much kinder than you can imagine. He is satisfied with a glance, with a sigh of love... In regard to myself, I find it easy to practice perfection, because I have learned that the way to Jesus is through His Heart. Consider a small child who has vexed his mother by a display of bad temper or disobedience. If the child hides in a corner through fear of punishment, he feels that his mother will not forgive him. But if instead, he extends his little arms towards her and with a smile cries out: 'Love, kiss me, mamma, I will not do it again,' will not his mother press the little one to her heart with tenderness, and forget what the child has done? And yet, though she knows very well that her dear little one will misbehave again at the first opportunity, that means nothing if the child appeals to her heart. He will never be punished..."

"Even if the fire of love seemed to have gone out, I would keep on throwing fuel in it and Jesus would take care to light it up again."

"We must do all that lies in our power; we must give without counting the cost; we must constantly renounce ourselves. In one word, we must prove our love by all the good works we can perform; but, since all that we

can do is very little, it is of the greatest importance that we put our confidence in Him who alone sanctifies those works and that we recognize that we are indeed useless servants, hoping that the good Lord will give us through grace all that we desire."

"My mother, how sweet is the way of love! No doubt, we are liable to fall, to fail in constancy, but love knows how to draw profit from everything. It quickly consumes anything that may be displeasing to Jesus, leaving only a humble and profound peace at the bottom of our heart."

"I do not have any other means to prove my love to you, but to throw flowers, that is to let no little sacrifice, no look, no word pass, to take advantage of all the littlest of things and to do them out of love... Hence, I pluck every flower I find on my way, for Jesus. And then as I strew my flowers before Him I desire to sing, although I have had to pluck them among thorns. And the sharper and longer the thorns, the sweeter is my song." (MS B, 4r-4v, OC 228)

"Little things done out of love are those that charm the Heart of Christ... On the contrary, the most brilliant deeds, when done without love, are but nothingness."

"You make me think of a little child that is learning to stand but does not yet know how to walk. In his desire to reach the top of the stairs to find his mother, he lifts his little foot to climb the first stair. It is all in vain, and at each renewed effort he falls. Well, be this little child: through the practice of all the virtues, always lift your little foot to mount the staircase of holiness, but do not imagine that you will be able to go up even the first step! No, but the good God does not demand more from you than good will. From the top of the stairs, He looks at you with love. Soon, won over by your useless efforts, He will come down Himself and, taking you in His arms, He will carry you up... But if you stop lifting your little foot, He will leave you a long time on the ground." (*Counsels and Reminiscences*)

Love of Neighbor

"You are wrong to criticize this or that, to desire that everybody should adopt your view of things. Since we want to be little children, little children do not know what is best. Everything seems right to them."

"We must never refuse anyone, even when it costs us much pain. Think that it is Jesus who is asking this service of you; how eager and friendly you will then be in granting the favor requested."

"I must anticipate the desires of others; show that we are much obliged, very honored to be able to render service. The good Lord wants me to forget myself in order to give pleasure to others."

"There is a way of refusing that is so gracious... that the refusal gives as much pleasure as the gift."

"I know now that true charity consists in bearing all our neighbors' defects--not being surprised at their weakness, but edified at their smallest virtues."

To Love is to Give Oneself

"I am glad to recognize that when we love God our heart expands, and we can give incomparably more tender love to those who are dear to us than when our love is selfish and barren... Love is fed by and develops from sacrifice. The more we deprive ourselves of natural satisfaction, the stronger and the more disinterested our love becomes."

"He does not want us to love Him for His gifts, but for Himself alone... He is so beautiful, so ravishing even when He remains silent, even when He hides Himself."

"O my Jesus, You know well that it is not for the reward that I serve You, but solely because I love You and in order to save souls."

"I do not desire sensible affection, a love that I feel, but only a love that is felt by Jesus. Oh! to love Him and

cause Him to be loved!"

"Our love for Jesus is truly great when we do not feel its sweetness. It then becomes a martyrdom... When, on the contrary, we begin to seek ourselves, true love dies away. Unfortunately, many serve Jesus when He consoles them, but few are willing to keep Him company when He is asleep."

"True love is found only in complete self-forgetfulness, and it is only after we have detached ourselves from every creature that we find Jesus."

¹ BL. POPE JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter, *Divini Amoris Scientia*, # 7, October 19th, 1997.

² BL. POPE JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter, *Divini Amoris Scientia*, # 7, October 19th, 1997.

³ REV. FRANCOIS JAMART, OCD, *Complete Doctrine of St. Therese of Lisieux*, Ch. XI, pg. 145-146.

⁴ THERESE OF LISIEUX, *Story of a Soul*, Manuscript B, Ch. XI, v 3.

⁵ REV. FRANCOIS JAMART, OCD, *Complete Doctrine of St. Therese of Lisieux*, Ch. XI, pgs. 145-146.

⁶ THERESE OF LISIEUX, *Last conversations*, July 22, 1897.

⁷ POPE FRANCIS, Angelus message in St. Peter's Square, May 26th, 2013.

⁸ POPE BENEDICT XVI, General Audience, St. Peter Square, April 6th, 2011.

⁹ MOTHER ADELA GALINDO, Foundress of the Congregation of the Servants of the Pierced Hearts of Jesus and Mary, Letter 68, September 15th, 2006.

¹⁰ POPE PAUL VI, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, Nov.21, 1964, # 39.

¹¹ POPE PAUL VI, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, Nov.21, 1964, # 40.

¹² MOTHER ADELA GALINDO, Foundress of the congregation Servants of the Pierced Hearts of Jesus and Mary, Letter # 97, October 28, 2007.

¹³ BL. POPE JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter, *Divini Amoris Scientia*, # 8, October 19th, 1997.

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