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ST. THÉRÈSE AND GRACE (Part Two)

St. Thérèse, a Doctor of the Church, is our chosen instructor to unveil for us the wonders of God's grace in human lives. She helps us perceive the secrets of the divine action all around us. "Jesus deigned to teach me this mystery. He set before me the book of nature. I understood how all the flowers He has created are beautiful, how the splendor of the rose and the whiteness of the lily do not take away the perfume of the little violet or the delightful simplicity of the daisy....So it is in the world of souls. Jesus willed to create great souls, lilies and roses, but He has created smaller ones...to give joy to God's glances when He looks down at His feet...Perfection consists in being what He wills us to be" (*Story of a Soul (SS)*, p 14,).

We can't all be tall fragrant flowers. In fact, we don't all want to be. We won't apologize to ourselves or to others for being what we are. It's worth mentioning here that the first fragrance connected with St. Thérèse, the aroma noted after her death, was the perfume of violets. Not roses. Violets. Let's look more closely at a wild flower-- the violet or the daisy that Thérèse refers to. A wild flower gets buffeted by the wind and rain. It hugs the soil of a field exposed to winter cold and summer heat or it lives deep in the woods. It is not kept in a greenhouse. The wild flower is very flexible. No one comes by to water it. It accepts what the changing weather brings. Thérèse says of such wild flowers that their simplicity attracts God. And then she goes on to make the further point that in them, "God manifests His infinite grandeur. Just as the sun shines simultaneously on the tall cedars and on each little flower as though it were alone on the earth, so our Lord is occupied particularly with each soul as though there were no others like it" (*ibid*).

How true her words are, for indeed there are no others like it. As at the beginning of creation, God now looks at what has been brought forth in you, whether you image a rose or a lily or a cornflower and proclaims, "Very good." So good that Jesus will shine the sun of divine love upon you continuously, offering you the ongoing gifts of His grace, for each moment of each hour of your life. This is the destiny of "everyone who is named as Mine, whom I created for My glory, whom I formed and made" (Is 43:7).

The author of the Epistle to the Ephesians explains, "Grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift" (4:7). And reading further in Second Timothy, you understand why you are who you are. "God has saved us and called us with a holy calling for God's own purpose and by the grace given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time" (1:9). God had a purpose in summoning you into being. In prayer, we unlock some of the secrets of that divine intent. We understand more fully how the happenings that involve us are speaking to us and conveying messages from God. None of us are perfect, but we do not become discouraged. St. Thérèse recounts. "At the beginning of my spiritual life...I used to ask myself what I would have to strive for later on because I believed it was quite impossible for me to

understand perfection better." This is the misconception of someone who wants wholeheartedly to pursue holiness and thinks his or her vision of what it takes is entirely accurate. Thérèse continues, " I learned very quickly since then that the more one advances, the more one sees the goal is still far off. And now I am simply resigned to see myself always imperfect and in this I find my joy" (S S, p.158). We do not give up trying to be better but we don't ever lose hope. We take comfort in the words spoken to Isaiah, "It is I, I who wipe out for my own sake your offenses. Your sins I remember no more" (43:25).

Hesed is a Hebrew word that is used at times in scripture to connote grace. It means desire, ardor, love. The French Carmelite speaks of "the totally gratuitous gifts of Jesus," and how "His mercy alone brought about everything that is good in her " (SS, p.15). She celebrates a Creator's love which comes to us with longing to give, to pour out gifts in abundance. Her writings point out ways to make space for the divine largesse of grace to enter in and direct our lives. As St. Thérèse once repeated the words of the Psalmist, so we do now, "Behold, God is my helper. The Lord sustains my life" (Ps 54:6).

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