

This reflection appeared first in *The Church World*, the diocesan weekly of Maine.

[<<Hub](#)

© copyright 2003 by S. Margaret Dorgan, DCM

[part 1: WHAT IS GRACE?](#)

[part 2: ST. THÉRÈSE AND GRACE](#)

[part 3: MORE ABOUT GRACE](#)

THE GRACE OF CONVERSION (Part Four)

In her autobiography, St. Therese of Lisieux describes a decisive grace which occurred at Christmas just before her fourteenth birthday. She writes, "I received the grace of leaving my childhood, the grace of my complete conversion" (*Story of a Soul*, p. 98). She celebrated this release every year afterwards. Let's look more closely at this triumph of grace in Therese. You might say, "Conversion. Why conversion? She was a very faithful Catholic teenager." Therese tells us why. "Although God showered His graces upon me...I was still very imperfect....I was unbearable because of my extreme sensitiveness....If I happened to cause anyone I loved some little trouble, even unwittingly...I cried and then I'd begin to cry for having cried....God would have to work a little miracle to make me grow up in an instant," and she proclaims, "This miracle He performed....He made me strong and courageous, arming me with His weapons" (*SS*, p 97).

The grace of conversion. Some of us can identify in our lives a moment like Therese's when the shackles fell away. We became free of chains that had kept us in bondage. We were trying to walk in the ways of the Lord, but we just seemed to crawl and we stumbled often. Then swiftly it came. Grace lifted us from our misery, loosened our fetters. We could not only walk, we ran. The utter gratuitousness of our deliverance took us by surprise. New spiritual energy invigorated us. Like Therese, we could say, "(Jesus) made me strong and courageous, arming me with His weapons." She continues, "Since that night I have never been defeated in any combat...but rather walked from victory to victory....The source of my tears was dried up" (*SS*, p. 97).

Notice in her description of this grace that she had tried. She had put forth effort. She labored hard to overcome her extreme sensitiveness but without success. Then she recounts the moment of conversion. "The work I had been unable to do in ten years was done by Jesus in one instant, contenting Himself with my good will which was never lacking" (*SS*, p 98).

This kind of definitive grace alters a life, even if externally the changes may seem slight. All our human efforts that we considered almost fruitless were preparations for the gift that makes everything emerge in power and beauty. The sun breaks through and shines with a hitherto unknown radiance. A strengthening power has been communicated. In Second Timothy, the disciple was told to "fan into a flame the gift God gave you" (1:6). When we are inflamed by grace we are lit up and fired for virtue.

For Therese, her Christmas conversion was a major intervention of God. Yet she realized that Divine Providence is at work in all the details of our lives. We may experience a major conversion, but life has lesser conversions too. Grace enables us to make daily choices that deepen our union with Jesus.

Therese declares, "More than ever, I understand that the smallest events of our life are conducted by God. He is the One who makes us desire and who grants our desires" (*Letter 201*). In her autobiography, she writes, " Jesus teaches without the noise of words. Never have I heard him speak, but I feel that He is within me at each moment. He is guiding me and inspiring me with what I must say and do" (*SS* , p 179).

Grace gives us already the beginning of eternal life. The Carmelite nun saw the riches of this earthly life in the linking of every passing instant with the timelessness of eternity. She wrote to her sister Celine, "Yes, life is a treasure. Each moment is an eternity...there is only Jesus who is; all the rest is not. Let us love Him, then, unto folly." How will love express this so-called folly? Her letter explains, "Jesus is giving us the remarkable grace of instructing us Himself and of showing us a hidden light. Life will be short, eternity is without end...Let all the moments of our life be for Him alone; let creatures touch us only in passing" (*Letter 96*). Therese sees time interacting with eternity, earth and heaven connecting. It is grace that unites what seem so infinitely distant from each other.

Sanctifying grace brings about within me such a radical change that I can claim to be a citizen of heaven already. Like Therese, I embrace my legacy. When she says, "Let creatures touch us only in passing," she is not urging a rejection of created beings. But as destined for heaven, we deal with all creatures in a fresh way. We appreciate their goodness but we do not cling to them. We don't grasp them so tightly that we become enslaved. This is our response to the new reality grace establishes within us. It is not a case of forsaking the joys of earth but of seeing them as reflections of eternal joy. In this same letter, Therese summarizes what existence in this world is for her. "There is only one thing to do during the night, the one night of life which will come only once, and this is to love, to love Jesus with all the strength of our heart and to save souls for Him that He may be loved" (*Letter 96*).

But what she calls the one night of life is not without gladness. She writes when her death is drawing near, " Allow me then, during my exile, the delights of love....Jesus. O Jesus, if the desire of loving You is so delightful, what will it be to possess and enjoy this Love?" (*SS*, p.197) For her and for us, grace opens up our spirit to what awaits us beyond this one night of life.

"The Lord bestows His grace, and at night I have His song, a prayer to my living God" (Ps. 42:9).

Sister Margaret Dorgan, DCM

Continue with [GRACE Part Five](#)