

Sr. Margaret Dorgan's Weekly

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DEALING WITH ANXIETY

St. Therese of Lisieux is a great spiritual pragmatist who wants us to use every aspect of our human experience for God. With her, nothing is worthless. She is wonderfully resourceful in transforming what seems like a negative into something positive. Just before her seventeenth birthday, she writes to her sister, "Ah! Let us profit, let us profit from the shortest moments; let us act like misers, and let us be jealous of the smallest things for the Beloved. Another year has passed, and just as this year has passed so also will our life pass and soon we shall say, 'It is gone.' Let us not waste our time; soon eternity will shine for us" (*Letter 101*). Therese then had a little more than seven-and-a-half years to live.

Making each moment valuable means we focus on what we are actually dealing with in our lives. What has gone before and what will come after contain their own special measure of God's grace. But only this particular Today holds the gift actually being offered. We gather in our attention to face this Today, to accept it in all its individuality and find what God has enclosed in it for us. This Today is our sure link with eternity—eternity, which dawns for us as a very different kind of day—one that never ends. The movement of time is not like that. Each hour passes away and another approaches. Yesterday is gone and Tomorrow is not yet, and when it arrives, this Today will be no more. Therefore we grasp hold of each hour and let it release its unique treasure for us.

Apprehension about the future takes us away from the gift God is offering. We use up our interior energy which should be centered on the grace being provided. To welcome that grace in all its fullness of strengthening and enlightenment, we turn away from the nagging tug of worry. Anxiety would distract us from the message of merciful love our God wants to communicate in our immediate experience.

Therese declares, "Jesus gives me at every moment what I am able to bear and nothing more. If the next moment He increases my suffering, He also increases my strength. I suffer only for an instant." It's because we think too much of the past and of the future that we become discouraged, she explains. (*Her Last Conversations* p.155).

But what if we can't avoid worrying? What if it hangs on like an uninvited intruder who won't go away? Therese would say to offer up the burden of that interloper as long as you can't get rid of it. You ask God to be with you during its unwanted visit. And you use its nagging reminders to invoke hope.

The young Carmelite endured an intense spiritual purification, what is called "a dark night of the soul." She was assailed by doubts about eternity—unwelcome thoughts that mocked her faith, telling her there was nothing at all after this earthly life. Worry may be what is attacking us, and she urges us to make more acts of hope

and confidence, calling on the mercy of God to penetrate our awareness. She explains her own manner of acting, "At each new occasion of combat, when my enemy provokes me, I conduct myself bravely...I turn my back on my adversary without deigning to look him in the face...I run towards my Jesus" (*Story of a Soul* p. 213). Like Therese, then, when anxiety assaults us, let us treat it as an adversary with whom we refuse to duel. We don't get involved in a dialogue with worries. They wear us out and consume our energy on what has not yet occurred. They suck out the graces of the present moment. And yet, if weary as we are of their persistent pestering, we can't unload them, then we offer them up like a buzzing insect who won't fly off. We use them to point our attention to the mercy of God.

We can employ this method with anything that deprives us of peace. We use it with temptations in all their variety--with thoughts of pride or anger, with whatever solicits us by bothersome overtures that take us from God. We don't engage in a direct duel because that would only implant the images more firmly in our imagination. We make a swift flight to the mercy of God. An aspiration for help. "My Jesus, come to my aid." This withdrawal in peace puts you at once in contact with Christ, Who is always present to you. You turn what is negative into something positive.

Therese reflects on feelings that are beyond our control and says, "I don't allow myself to be trapped" (*Her Last Conversations*, p. 42). Trapped. She tells us how to unlock the trap that our thoughts can push us into. What unbinds the trap is to turn at once to the merciful love of God. The more we use this method the more we establish a habit. When the unwanted temptations or anxieties arise in our thoughts, we find ourselves moving more quickly--almost automatically- toward the release that the remembrance of God's merciful love gives us.

Each one of us says to Jesus, "Even though I walk in the dark valley, I fear no evil, for You are at my side." Whatever the valley, whatever the darkness, I have a powerful Savior who loves me. **"Only goodness and kindness follow me all the days of my life"** (Ps 23).

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