



"God's Mercy is Greater!"

THE TEACHING OF ST. THERESE OF LISIEUX ON PURGATORY

by Father Dr. Hubert van Dijk, ORC¹

Doctor of the Church for the third millennium

St Therese of Lisieux, who was declared Doctor of the Church by Pope John Paul II on October 19, 1997, felt the calling in the monastery to teach others and wanted to be a teacher (docteur)¹ Early on, God revealed the mysteries of His Love to her. She writes about this: "Ah! Had the learned who spent their life in study come to me, undoubtedly they would have been astonished to see a child of fourteen understand perfection's secrets, secrets all their knowledge cannot reveal because to possess them one has to be poor in spirit!"²



In his apostolic letter *Divini Amoris Scientia*, published when St Therese was declared Doctor of the Church, the Holy Father says that one should not look for a scientific revelation of God's mysteries. *"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 faith, and because of her particular understanding of the mystery of Christ... That assimilation was certainly favored by the most singular natural gifts, but it was also evidently something prodigious, due to a charism of wisdom from the Holy Spirit."*³

Her writings offer an abundance of ideas concerning practically every field in theology and spirituality, a multitude which even a hundred years after her death has been far from exhausted. As the popes repeatedly express: Therese of Lisieux is a gift to the Church. Before the year 2000, she was declared Doctor of the Church, becoming the third woman amongst the thirty-three recognized Doctors of the Church. She died young. Not only is she the youngest of all, but also the best known, loved, and read! Already she has given the Church a lot, and in the dawn of a new millennium, she will continue to bless the faithful with her many gifts. Thus, she is also known as "Doctor of the Church of the third millennium."

"One does not need to go to Purgatory"

Little Therese's theology is a theology that springs from life, a theology of experience. She received a fervent Catholic upbringing at home, in her parish community, as well as at the school of the Benedictine nuns in Lisieux, and thus, she was familiar with the teaching of Purgatory. Being lead by-the Holy Spirit, thoughts, notions, and ideas developed which finally became, "The teaching of the Little Flower on Purgatory."⁴

The common teaching within the Church is that Purgatory can hardly be avoided. While still only a novice, the saint commented about this with one of the sisters, Sr. Maria Philomena, who believed in the near impossibility of going to heaven without passing through purgatory:

You do not have enough trust. You have too much fear before the good God. I can assure you that He is grieved over this. You should not fear Purgatory because of the suffering there, but should instead ask that you not deserve to go there in order to please God, Who so reluctantly imposes this punishment. As soon as you try to please Him in everything and have an unshakable trust He purifies you every moment in His love and He lets no sin remain. And then you can be sure that you will not have to go to Purgatory.⁵

She even said that we would *offend* God if we didn't trust enough that we would get to heaven right after dying. When she found out that her novices talked occasionally that they would probably have to expect to be in Purgatory, she corrected them saying: "Oh! How you grieve me! You do a great injury to God in believing you're going to Purgatory. When we love, we can't go there."⁶ Now, this is a new doctrine, but only for those who don't know God, who are not childlike, who don't trust. It is so correct to see things this way. It is true that God will judge us at one point, but He is always and first our Father Who... suffers when He has to punish His child and sees its suffering. The child should do His will just out of love, and not to avoid punishment. And this really means that God does not want Purgatory! He allows that His children suffer, but only *as if He had to look away*.⁷

If St. Therese is correct that one does not need to be in Purgatory because God Himself does not want this and would *love* to help us, the thought that Purgatory can be avoided is suddenly not so far-fetched anymore. But first there is the problem of the . aforementioned opinion which says that only few will avoid Purgatory. This is confirmed by great saints and mystics like St. John of the Cross who says, "Only a small number of souls achieve perfect love"⁸ (perfect love is necessary to go straight to heaven). St. Teresa of Avila also had the experience that only few will be able to avoid Purgatory.⁹ St. John Vianney said, "It is definite that only a few chosen ones do not go to Purgatory and the suffering there that one must. endure, exceeds our imagination."¹⁰

One also has to take into consideration that even practicing Christians are convinced that even the good and faithful and those consecrated to God will have to be exposed to purification in Purgatory for a certain amount of time. The reason for this is always the same: "It is not easy to avoid Purgatory. No one is a saint, and I will certainly have to spend some time there myself." They add to this that "God is just" or "we certainly deserve this."

Therefore, it is even more amazing what St. Therese has to say. Once she encouraged her novice, Sr. Marie de la Trinite to have the faith that it was possible even for her to get to heaven right away. She wondered "If I fail even in: the smallest things, " may I still hope to get straight to heaven?" St Therese, who knew well the weaknesses of her novice, replied: "Yes! God is so good. He will know how He can come and get you. But despite this, try to be faithful, so that He does not wait in vain for your love."¹¹

God is Father rather than Judge.

Once St. Therese had a confrontation regarding this topic with Sr. Marie Febronia, who not only was sixty-seven years old but also was sub-prioress. She had heard that St. Therese encouraged the novices to believe that they could go straight to heaven. She did not like this as she considered this kind of confidence presumptuous, and thus she reproached St Therese. St Therese tried lovingly and calmly to explain to Sr. Febronia her point of view but with no success as Sr. Febronia clung to belief. For St. Therese God was more Father than Judge, and she took the liberty of finally responding, "My sister, if you look for the justice of God you will get it. The soul will receive from God exactly what she desires."

The year had not passed when, in January 1892, Sr. M. Febronia together with other sisters fell prey to the flu and died. Three months later Sr. Therese had a dream which she related to her Mother Prioress and which was then documented: "O my Mother, my Sr. M Febronia came to me last night and asked that we should pray for her: She is in Purgatory, *surely* because she had trusted too little in the mercy of the good Lord. Through her imploring behavior and her profound looks, it seemed she wanted to say, You were right. I am now delivered up to the full justice of God but it is my fault. If I had listened to you I would not be here now."¹²

St. Therese's "doctrine" in 7 key words

1. Purgatory became a rule rather than the exception.

An infinite number of souls who suffer in Purgatory and for whom the Church prays daily after consecration did not need to go there. If we think in human terms, God does not wish for us to need Purgatory. God does not put us here on earth, where we are tested and are suffering after the fall, only to let us suffer *again*--and much *worse*--in Purgatory. Everyone receives enough graces in order to go straight to God after passing the trials on earth. However, Purgatory is an emergency entry to Heaven for those who have wasted their time. However, what God considered the *exception became the rule*, and the *rule*--to go straight to heaven--*became the exception*.

2. To cope with the "inevitable" is a grave error.

Since God does not really want Purgatory, He does not want it for me either! But then I also have to not want it! Nobody would expose themselves to the danger of Purgatory by living a mediocre and--as is the case so often today--a sinful life. *If they only thought of the intense sufferings in Purgatory*. In this regard, the mystics

unanimously say that *the least suffering in Purgatory is much greater than the greatest suffering here on earth!* The reason for this is that once in Purgatory, one does not go through the time of God's Mercy but of God's Justice. Here, the Lord's word applies: "I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the very last copper" (Lk 12:59). The many who carelessly say, "I will probably spend some time there," are *gravely* wrong. *Nobody just spends some time there*, one has to suffer there like one has never suffered nor could have suffered while on earth. One often even suffers a *long time* there also. If the Poor Souls in Purgatory had known on earth what to expect in eternity, Purgatory would have remained empty.

3. *Purgatory is a waste of time.*

This is what St. Therese says, "I know that of myself I would not merit even to enter that place of expiation since only holy souls can have entrance there. But I also know that the Fire of Love is more sanctifying than is the fire of Purgatory. I know that Jesus cannot desire useless sufferings for us, and that He would not inspire the longings I feel unless He wanted to grant them."¹³ It is true that Purgatory is a wonderful grace, for if needed, without the purification in Purgatory we would not go to Heaven, and the work of art which God intended and created us to be would not be completed. But St. Therese is right: at the moment of our death we already have our place in Heaven. Afterwards, there is no growing in grace anymore. Whoever does not go through Purgatory does not miss anything.

4. *We need a more positive image of God.*

We already know that St. Therese told her novices that they offended God when they thought they would go to Purgatory. That is a very shocking statement: for if this is correct millions of Christians are offending God or at least hurt Him. And yet this is the case. They are focused only on themselves, thinking--not without reason--that they deserve Purgatory. They do not notice God Who is by their side and would love to help them so much. The fact that we fear Purgatory so much also has to do with a rather negative image that we have of God. We, Christians of the 20th Century, were like so many, raised with the image of a strict God, anxious to punish us as often as we deserve it. This thinking goes back to heresies like Jansenism. Quietism, or Calvinism.¹⁴

5. *Love banishes fear*

The question of whether Heaven will follow right after death is a question of trust. God *does not need our merits* in order to take us straight to Him *but He needs all of our trust*. Or the other way around--it is *not -our sins* that can prevent God from giving us this grace *but rather our lack of trust*. Therefore, we must draw the conclusion that *everything depends solely on trust*. There is no trust without perfect love. And vice versa, there is no *love* without trust.

And this is exactly what the Apostle John writes in his first letter, "In this is love perfected with us, that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as

He is so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love" (1 Jn. 4:17-18).

This text enlightens our topic very much. Judgment Day is the day of our death. Whoever achieves perfect love at the moment of their death sees God as so merciful and generous that they cannot believe in punishment in Purgatory. We are dealing with the same kind of grace in the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches us that this Sacrament has as its real fruit the wiping out of punishment due to our sins.¹⁵ After those who have received the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, others present often notice that the sick enter a period of growing peace and trust, together with a great surrender to the Will of God, and even serenity and desire for Heaven. This also applies to those who up to that point did not believe or even lived in mortal sin. Even these people, as the great theologians of the scholastics say--for example, St. Albert the Great or St. Bonaventure--go straight to Heaven without having to go through Purgatory first. This shows the wonderful grace coming from the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.¹⁶

6. *The last will be the first.*

While many Christians do receive the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, experience tells us that they do not go straight to Heaven. The mystics often relate that many priests and religious suffer a long time and have to wait for their release. However, all of them or almost all of them have received the Sacrament of the Anointing. What is the reason for this? The answer is certainly that they did not receive the Sacrament with the necessary repentance or surrender to the Will of God, or that they did not want to change their flaws and vices a long time before their death.

St. Therese of Lisieux tells us that she heard that sometimes great saints with many merits come before the Judgment of God, but have to go to Purgatory because our justice before God is often unclean. That is why she recommends to give immediately away all the merits of our good deeds, and that it is better to appear before God empty-handed.¹⁷ She recommends to her oldest sister and godmother Marie, to be given Heaven free of charge by God.¹⁸

While on the one hand the first ones don't always get to Heaven first, on the other hand there are enough examples that the last ones become the first ones. Therese refers in her writings to the Lord's mercy towards the good thief,¹⁹ and wishes that the story from the "desert fathers," about how a great sinner called Paesie died out of love and is being taken straight to heaven, should be added to her autobiography, "Souls will understand immediately, for it is a striking example of what I'm trying to say."²⁰

When our great hour comes, as St. Therese writes to Abbe Roulland, missionary in China, if only we trust, the Blessed Virgin will obtain "the grace of making an act of

perfect love" should we have "some trace of human weakness" and so will we reach heaven immediately after death.²¹

7. *St. Therese's teaching, a great message for the third millennium*

One can rightfully say that Therese is turning all common opinions on Purgatory upside down.²² She wants to appear before God empty-handed and explains why it can be easier for sinners who have nothing to rely upon, to reach Heaven than the great saints with all their merits.. She emphasizes that trust alone is enough, that merits are no guarantee but often an obstacle for the straight way to Heaven, and that sins do not need to be an obstacle. After a 'messed-up' life, God can still take one straight to Heaven if the dying person only has trust. And how easy it can be to trust if there are no merits but only one's misery! Through trust she shows the shorter way to Heaven to the small and humble. And so many can and will go that way. She writes about this to her sister Marie: "... what pleases Him (God) is *that He sees me loving my littleness and my poverty, the blind hope that I have in His mercy...* That is my only treasure, dear Godmother, why should this treasure not be yours?..."²³

As has been said, she has made sanctity available for everyone through her little way, and this is also true for the straight way to Heaven... This will no longer be an exception. Once those who are smart enough to gather from the treasures of our new Doctor of the Church will walk this way easily, especially those who want to be part of the legion of little souls which St. Therese asked God for at the end of her manuscript B, "I beg You to cast Your Divine Glance upon a great number of *little* souls. I beg You to choose a legion of *little* Victims worthy of Your LOVE!"²⁴ Yes, by listening to her wonderful message there will be many, many souls... *and with that, Purgatory stops being the unavoidable detour to Heaven!*

Conclusion

St. Therese of the Child Jesus gave us a lot to think about. There are yet many new thoughts to be understood in terms of theology. For us, however, the most important, even existentially significant of everything she wrote is the message on Purgatory. The question of what happens to us after death should move us deeply. Let us just remember Sr. Febronia and her suffering in Purgatory; her silent message from the next world should move us. "It seemed," says Therese, "as if she wanted to say: If I had listened to you I would not be here now." This is actually shocking when you think about it. One has to admit that Sr. Febronia entered the next world through the wrong door. And with her, thousands and millions who would have managed to avoid Purgatory. And why did they not achieve this? The simple reason is that nobody showed them the correct way. Considering this, one does understand that Therese is a true gift to the Church. God gave her to us as leader and comforter for the apocalyptic days in which we very obviously live. Her message concerning Purgatory is a true grace of God's merciful love for the moment of our death. One can apply the urgent exhortation of our LORD: "He who has ears to hear. let him hear" (Lk. 8:8).

Father Dr. Hubert van Dijk, ORC

Footnotes:

1. I would like to enlighten souls-as did the *Prophets* and the *Doctors*.' St Therese of Lisieux. *Story of a Soul*. ICS. Washington DC, 1996, Ms B, 2v, pg. 192.
2. St. Therese of Lisieux. *Story of a SOUL*, ICS, Washington DC, 1996, Ms A, 49r. Jig. 105.
3. Divini Amoris, I.c., Nr. 7.
4. Philippe de la Trinite, *La Doctrine de Sainte Therese sur le Purgatoire*. Editions du Parvis, CH-1648 Hauteville/Suisse 1992, pg. 16. .
5. *Annales de Sainte Therese*, Lisieux. Nr. 610, Febr. 1982. Translated from the German.
6. *Last Conversations*, ICS. Washington DC. 1971, pg 273..
7. *La Doctrine*, I.c. pg 16. Translated from the German.
8. St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, IT. ch. XX.
9. Ferdinand Holböck. *Das Fegefeuer*, Salzburg 1977, page 94f. Translated from the German.
10. *La Doctrine*, I.c. page 22f. Translated from the German.
11. Lucien Regnault, La Pensee de Ste. Therese de l'Enfant Jesus sur le Purgatoire in *Annales de Sainte Therese*, 1986, Suppl. Nr 101, pages 21-29, quote on page 26. Translated from the German.
12. *Annales de Sainte Therese*, Nr. 610. Feb. 1983, page 5. Translated from the German.
13. *Story of a Soul*, Ms A, 84v, pg.181.
14. *La Pensee*, I.c., page 23. Translated from the German.
15. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Suppl. Qu. 30, art. 1. Translated from the German.
16. P. Philipon. *Vie Spirituelle*, Jan./Feb. 1945, pages 21-23; 16-17. Translated from the German.
17. *La Doctrine*, I.c. page 13. Translated from the German.
18. St. Therese of Lisieux, *Letters St. Therese of Lisieux*, ICS, Washington DC, 1913, Vol. II, pg 998, LT 197.
19. *Pious Recreations*, RP 6, 9v, translated from the German.
20. *Last Conversations*. pg. 89. CJ, 11.7.6
21. *Letters of St. Therese of Lisieux*. Vol. II, pg. 1093, LT 226.
22. *La Pensee*, I.c., pg. 28. Translated from the German.
23. *Letters of St. Therese of Lisieux*, Vol. II, pg. 999, LT 197.
24. *Story of a Soul*, pg. 200. Ms B, 5v.

(1) Webmaster's Note: This article, in German, appears in the December 2001, and the January 2002 issue of "Der Fels" (A German Catholic Publication) - see www.der-fels.de/2001/12-2001.pdf and www.der-fels.de/2002/01-2002.pdf respectively. It was translated into English by Père (Father) de la Trinité, ocd. Fr. Van Dijk, confirmed the authenticity of his writing - which I had requested because it appears that our website is the only place where this article appears in English. We have checked the references noted in the Footnotes, they all check out. Fr. Van Dijk hopes that we can make his paper known to the world. We shall try to do that. / Fred Schaeffer, SFO, webmaster. [top](#)

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