

### Transformation according to Saints Therese and Teresa of Avila



#### **My dear Sisters,**

During the recent assemblies of UISG (Union of International Superiors General) in Rome and LCWR (Leadership Conference of Women Religious), at St Louis in the USA, which I was privileged to participate in, the themes generally centred around individual/personal Transformation as well as future of Religious Life.

This time around when I was reflecting in some spare moments during the visitation my thoughts revolved around the word 'Transformation'. So, I felt I would focus on the two great saints Therese and Teresa who place before us how their lives were truly transformed through God's grace, so as to leave a lasting mark on future generations.

Thérèse had an extraordinary penetration into the heart of Jesus' teaching, something she chose for her everyday life. One particular way of prayer was especially dear to Therese. She loved to draw close to Scripture and to learn about Jesus Christ from the gospels. In fact, she wrote that whenever she was having a particularly arid period in prayer, the gospels always nurtured her. She found that the word of God, as Scripture says, was a 'lamp for her feet'. She would love to retain favourite passages or lines from scripture so that they came back to her during the day and energized her own commitment to Jesus Christ. In fact, Therese wrote that often enough a word from God, an insight, a sense

of direction, a response to a situation came to her not during the hour of prayer but when she was about her daily work.

Thérèse reminisces, for example, about an almost comical event from the time when she had been serving as sacristan. She needed to return the communion grating keys to the prioress, Mother Marie, who was ill and sleeping. Another sister came along, saw Thérèse about to open the door and feared that the prioress would awaken, so pressed to do the job for Thérèse. But Therese *really* wanted to fulfil the duty herself and felt confident that she could do it without waking the ailing prioress. A monastery-level commotion ensued as the two tried to quietly open the door. But unfortunately, Mother Marie woke up. The “helpful” nun promptly began to explain to the Prioress the embarrassing situation with an account that made her appear righteous. The Little Flower was about to offer her own version of the noisy event, but somehow became aware that it was the wrong path to take. So, she left. She simply let the “helpful” sister continue her explanation. The experience helped Thérèse understand that getting the last word, winning an argument, or appearing the grandest, was not what mattered; that a quiet letting go and humbly giving it to God would make it all work out just fine. She connects this funny event with a brief reference to a passage in 2 Corinthians 12:5: “About this person I will boast, but about myself I will not boast, except about my weaknesses”. (Story of a Soul)

In the middle portion of *Story of a Soul* (sometimes called “Manuscript B”), which is written as a letter, Thérèse *really* underscores her Little Way. Within this letter, she makes several biblical references that speak of simple means of reaching God. At one point in the letter, she presents these passages: “For the lowly may be pardoned out of mercy, but the mighty shall be mightily put to the test” (Wisdom 6:6), and “You shall nurse, carried in her arms, cradled upon her knees; as a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you” (Isaiah 66:12-13).

St Therese says, “Holiness does not consist in this or that practice but in the disposition of the heart which remains humble and little in the eyes of God. Trusting the Father and His will for us, meaning that one becomes like a little child”.

May I add here, with a bit of pleasant surprise that, during my recent visitation, something of this ‘holiness’ I saw in the eyes of our sisters in the community of Veronica Vihar where the four sisters and their co-workers, who look after the differently abled people at that centre. The love, tenderness and the compassion with which they lovingly tend to the young vulnerable adults in most

simple ways, was really edifying, to say the least. Most of the inmates there have no families; the sisters are members of their family and the convent their home. Everyone in this community strives daily to just be compassionate as they walk together with the inmates, reflecting their faith and trust in God for their needs. And they depend on God for enlightenment as they care for those who are specially loved by God.

Coming back to the way Therese did it, would it not be great for us to spend a little more time reading and reflecting on the Word of God (maybe let us begin with the daily Mass readings) and go deeper at the heart level to find out what the Word is saying to me/us as an individual and as community? And to reflect further as to how I/we live this Word in my/our daily life, in my/our challenges of community living and in my/our uncertain future of life and ministry.

This will surely help us to walk with God, as it were, which is again a daily choice we need to make. Do we care enough to make efforts to know Him a little more and nurture a relationship with Him, as did Therese? Do we take the first step to put the seed in the soil and even if the first step is not our own initiative, can we allow God to work IN us before we can allow Him to work THROUGH us? And would that not bring some sort of 'Transformation' in us individually and in the community, collectively?

St Teresa of Avila on the other hand speaks of 'Transformation' in spirituality or spiritual life. She says that in our spiritual journey we encounter a complex form of mysticism. In the fifth mansion, described in her *Interior Castle* is a way of ascent involving self-transformation. Chapter II of Interior Castle (Fifth Mansion), she writes, "I could tell you much about the marvels our Lord works in it. I will describe some of them in my own way, also the state in which they leave the soul, and will use a suitable comparison to elucidate the matter, explaining that though we can take no active part in this work of God within us, yet we may do much to prepare ourselves to receive this grace. You have heard how wonderfully silk is made--in a way such as God alone could plan--how it all comes from an egg resembling a tiny pepper-corn. Not having seen it myself, I only know of it by hearsay, so if the facts are inaccurate the fault will not be mine. When, in the warm weather, the mulberry tree comes into leaf, the little egg which was lifeless before its food was ready, begins to live. The caterpillar nourishes itself upon the mulberry leaves until, when it has grown large, people place near it small twigs upon which, of its own accord, it spins silk from its tiny mouth until it has made a narrow little cocoon in which it buries itself. Then this large and ugly worm leaves the cocoon as a beautiful butterfly".

Again, the great saint invites us to grow further in spiritual life. “Forward then, my daughters! Hasten over your work and build the little cocoon. Let us renounce self-love and self-will, care for nothing earthly, do penance, pray, mortify yourselves, be obedient, and perform all the other good works of which you know. Act up to your light; you have been taught your duties. Die! Die as the silkworm does when it has fulfilled the office of its creation, and you will see God and be immersed in His greatness, as the little silkworm is enveloped in its cocoon. Understand that when I say 'you will see God...’”

In recent months, I have felt that our Lord’s invitation is very clear to each one of us. On the occasion of the Feasts of both Therese and Teresa, the two great Carmelite saints as well as the Bi-Centenary of Mother Veronica’s birth, let us work towards our individual transformation, which in turn will bring transformation in our communities and eventually in the religious life itself. Let us also remember that our personal transformation is not just for ourselves but for the larger society, where we are all attempting to help establish the Kingdom of God. But it has to start from oneself.

I believe that we are being led to a conversion that only God can bring about, as so often repeated by both Therese & Teresa, John of the Cross and many other saints. What God requires of us is to be open to His working. God requires our sincere response, from the depths of our hearts. Some small signs of moving forward have begun to appear in the congregation, for example Charism retreats, Spiritual Conversations, sharing of the ‘Lived Word’ in communities is helping the sisters to go deeper. Some sisters read scriptures, the seminars/meetings/ that are held are all in process form and reflective which is found to be helpful in our spiritual life. However, we will need to sense from our depths, rather than simply from external signs, as to what God is asking of us individually and as a community. One thing I am certain of is that this does not happen overnight or like magic but a slow and steady process of our commitment to encounter God in our sacred space. Let us continue to walk in the Presence of the Lord and listen to His voice.

The sisters of my team and I wish you a very Happy Feast.

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