



Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux

Team Notes For:

- **Chapter Three:
The Distressing Years
(1881 – 1883)**
- **Chapter Four: First
Communion, Boarding
School (1881 – 1883)**

Next Week's

Reading:

- **Chapter Five
Pgs 97 – 118**
- **Chapter Six
Pgs 121– 144**

Love is the key.

➤ **Thérèse struggled with loss early in life; she was coddled; she felt distanced by schoolmates and teachers**

- Thérèse experienced much suffering having, essentially, lost three mothers as a child (her natural mother at age 4, her sister Pauline (stand-in mother) who joined the convent, and her next stand-in mother, her sister Marie (also joined the convent). *“And I was about to lose my second Mother! Ah! how can I express the anguish of my heart!”* (p 58). These losses undoubtedly had a significant influence on her.
 - She later reflected on the ‘loss’ of Pauline and her gratefulness for getting through it (underline added), *“I shed bitter tears because I did not yet understand the joy of sacrifice. I was weak, so weak that I consider it a great grace to have been able to support a trial that seemed to be far above my strength!”* (p 58).
 - In anticipation of Marie’s departure, she became demanding of Marie’s attention, *“I wanted to get a supply of kisses to make up for all the time I was to be deprived of them”* (p 91). Yet amidst her many selfish acts, she reminded us that we need to spend time with and show appreciation for our loved ones while they are with us.
 - *“I really made a big fuss over everything! I was just the opposite of what I am now, for God has given me the grace not to be downcast at any passing thing.”* (p 91)
 - As much as Thérèse was loved and attended to by her family, she was equally distanced by schoolmates and teachers, which caused her to feel as an outsider and alone. Perhaps because she had been coddled – she was laughed at, when *at eleven years old*, she didn’t know how to brush and care for her hair (p 75); perhaps because she was advanced for her age – she was placed in the grade above her natural level and did not fit in, she recalled that a student of lesser academic ability *“...made me pay in a thousand ways for my little successes.”* (p 53); or perhaps because she didn’t relate to or feel at home with typical children’s activities. Throughout these chapters, Thérèse keenly recalls many examples of how she simply didn’t fit in. *“The five years I spent in school were the saddest of my life.”* (p 53). In looking back, she recognized, *“I didn’t have enough virtue, however, to rise above these miseries of life, so my poor little heart suffered very much.”* (p 53).
 - Her struggles seem on par with how so many feel today: alone and suffering. We were reminded to be careful in how we treat others, that we’re all made differently and that’s a good thing; we recalled Thérèse’s analogy of the beauty found in a garden made of diverse flowers (p 14).
 - Thérèse, on one hand being so loved and spoiled by her family, and on the other, being so distanced from her contemporaries, we were left considering the importance of the decisions we make in handling our own situations. These chapters showed us how, even as a child, Thérèse begins to deal with her trials. She could have easily given up, become unruly, distant from everyone or many other negative things. But she didn’t, why? How was she able to overcome her life’s circumstances – this starts to be revealed in these chapters.

➤ **The risk of distraction and destruction caused by the allure of worldly things**

- Thérèse reflected that her own self-love that made her vulnerable to ‘the world’ – she loved hearing compliments about herself. This caused her to reflect later, *“Oh! How I pity souls that are lost! It is so easy to go astray on the flowery paths of the world”* (p 86). She revealed that in the end, the isolation from classmates and others limited her engagement with the world and that turned out to be very beneficial. She felt she may have been too attracted to the world and then gotten lost within it and thus, lost to the Lord: *“My heart, sensitive and affectionate as it was, would have easily surrendered had it found a heart capable of understanding it.... but not knowing how to win the good graces of creatures, I was unable to succeed. O blessed ignorance! which has helped me avoid great evils! How can I thank Jesus for making me find “only bitterness in earth’s friendships!” With a heart such as mine, I would have allowed myself to be taken and my wings to be clipped and then how would I have been able to “fly and be at rest?” How can a heart given over to the affection of creatures be intimately united with God?... I have seen so many souls, seduced by this false light, like poor moths and burn their wings, and then return to the real and gentle light of Love that gives them new wings which are more brilliant and delicate, so that they can fly toward Jesus”* (pls read all of p 83).

➤ **Thérèse’s sources of strength: family, faith, Mary and the Eucharist**

- **In these times of trial, Thérèse relied heavily on her family** *“The poor little thing [herself] needed these family joys*

very much, for without them life at the boarding school would have been too hard.” (p 54).

- Thérèse reflected on and genuinely appreciated the motherly support received from her sisters and father. “During my retreat I became aware that I was really a child who was fondled and cared for like few other children on earth, especially among those deprived of their mothers.” (p 75).
 - **Thérèse shares with us consistent references to the Virgin Mary’s presence in their lives, the trust they placed in her and the source of strength Mary provided her:** “... sweet Queen of heaven was watching over her fragile little flower, that she was smiling on her from her throne in heaven and was preparing to stop the storm the moment her little flower was to break without any hope of recovery.” (p 60). “The miraculous statue of the Blessed Virgin that had spoken to Mama twice and the little flower often...”. “All of the sudden the Blessed Virgin appeared beautiful to me, so beautiful that never had I seen anything so attractive; her face was suffused with an ineffable benevolence and tenderness, but what penetrated to the very depths of my soul was the “ravishing smile of the Blessed Virgin.”” (p 64-66; footnote p 64).
 - On the day of her First Communion, Thérèse seeks the Blessed Virgin to guide her through her life: “In the afternoon, it was I who made the Act of Consecration to the Blessed Virgin. ...my Mother in heaven, I who had been deprived at such an early age of my earthly mother. I put all my heart into speaking to her, ...asking her to watch over her [myself].” (p 78)
 - **Thérèse deeply understood the grace of the Blessed Sacrament and looked forward to her First Holy Communion.** Not only did she look forward to her First Communion for four years (p 57). She understood it so well that she even lived vicariously through her older sister Céline’s First Communion, “I felt inundated with joy.... I believe I received great graces that day and I consider it one of the most beautiful in my life.” (p 57)
 - On her own First Holy Communion, “Ah! how sweet was that first kiss of Jesus! It was a kiss of love; I felt that I was loved, and I said: “I love You, and I give myself to You forever!”
 - We had much discussion regarding the day after her First Communion, as she stated the day after “was still beautiful, but it was tinged with a certain melancholy. The beautiful dress Marie had bought me, all the gifts I had received did not satisfy my heart. Only Jesus could do this, and I longed for the moment when I could receive him a second time.” About one month later, she asked to receive Jesus again, and was granted permission, recalling, “What a sweet memory I have of this second visit of Jesus!... I repeated to myself these words of St. Paul: “It is no longer I that live, it is Jesus who lives in me!”” “I obtained permission to go to Holy Communion on all the principal feasts.” In those days, Communion wasn’t as available as it is today; Thérèse understood its value and longed for it.
 - **Similarly, she offers us a profound observation of Confirmation:** “A short time after my First Communion, I entered upon another retreat from my Confirmation, I was prepared with great care to receive the visit of the Holy Spirit, and I did not understand why greater attention was not paid to the reception of this sacrament of Love.” (p 80)
 - In observing Thérèse’s life thus far, one of our group noted how thankful we should be in seeing what the Lord can do with a soul who seeks him. He draws Thérèse ever-closer. By the end of these chapters, she begins to shed her childish ways, move beyond her hurts and find solace, peace and love through a growing relationship with Jesus.
- **Interestingly, Thérèse struggled with scrupulosity for one and a half years.**
- During this period of time, she believed that much of what she did was sinful: “All my most simple thoughts and actions became the cause of trouble for me.” (p 84) Upon sharing her ‘sins’ with her sister Marie, she “experienced peace only for an instant.” (p 84). Marie guided her through this difficult period of feeling the need for constant forgiveness for any infraction (p 88). Thérèse eventually recaptures her understanding and trust of the merciful Jesus; that Jesus knows we are human and knows our heart through regular, but not obsessive, confession.
- **Forgiveness, Given and Received = Love.**
- “I know that without Him, I could have fallen... and the profound words of Our Lord to Simon resound with great sweetness in my soul. I know that “he to whom less is forgiven, LOVES less.”” (p 83-84; Luke 7:47 – A Sinful Woman Forgiven). We discussed that we are often called to do positive things, such as in the Beatitudes. We are called to forgive and show mercy; we know the freedom this can bring us. But we don’t often talk about the good that is brought to the one who is forgiven or given mercy, how their lives can change for the better too. We discussed that we must be careful of the lasting hurt that can be caused by not forgiving or giving mercy – “he to whom less is forgiven, loves less.” Lives are changed, love is increased through forgiveness.
 - One of our group members noted: as in the story of ‘A Sinful Woman’, Jesus’ forgiveness makes room for much greater love within us. A huge grace of confession is that we can more easily forgive and give love to others because we know how much we’ve been forgiven and how much love we’ve been given.
 - “...I received absolution for the second time. My general confession left a great peace in my soul...” (p 76).