

SOLIDARITY WITH UNBELIEVERS

By MIRIAM VAUGHAN

WHEN THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX in the third manuscript of her autobiography wrote movingly about how her experiences at the time were helping her to understand the mindset of people who did not believe in God, she referred to these latter as sinners. ‘Sinners’ too is the more or less generic term Scripture uses for anyone who does not hold to the fulfilment of the whole Law as understood in religiously minded circles. In both cases, the term carries the sense that sin is being considered less as a moral problem and more as the lack of that which justifies. This places ‘the sinner’ in a marginalized, hence highly vulnerable, position where he or she is considered to be the object of either divine or human rejection – more usually, both. This is the sense that I also give the word.

The Gospels relate that Jesus was criticized for sitting at the table of sinners. ‘Why does your master eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ (Mt 9:11). However, since it is not recorded that Jesus discontinued the practice, it seems that those of his disciples who wished to remain continually with him were also obliged to sit there. So it is that these meals Jesus shared, presented as they are as celebratory affairs, are a telling symbol of what he was about. Solidarity at table with those he had particularly come to call – ‘I did not come to call the virtuous but sinners’ (Mt 9:13), sinners who, incidentally, were entering heaven ahead of these same virtuous (Mt 21:31) – is a prefiguring of the eternal feast of the kingdom of God.

For the Carmelite, as for every Christian, this growth into solidarity with those Christ is especially seeking is vital if we are to understand who we really are in the light of the Paschal mystery. The sinless one has, for our sake, been made into sin that, in him, we may become the goodness of God (2 Cor 5:21). This transformation must be accepted, but how can the person who does not stand with sinners as one of them, that is, who makes God a liar (1 Jn 1:8), be in any position to recognize this? With regard to the company he kept, Jesus refused to differentiate between virtuous and sinners; his companionship and friendliness were open to all who accepted it. He taught, so we are told, that we are to be

like our Father in heaven 'who causes his sun to rise on bad men as well as good' (Mt 5:45). Saving one's greetings for one's brothers is definitely not enough. 'You must therefore be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt 5:47-48). Moreover, in the prayer Jesus teaches his disciples, solidarity in sin is simply taken for granted. 'If you do not forgive others their failings, your heavenly Father will not forgive your failings either' (Mt 6:15). This is all a bit much when one can count on one's virtue.

Hans Urs von Balthasar argues the case that Thérèse had been done a great disservice by a well-meaning confessor when he assured her that she had never committed a serious sin, thereby removing her from the ranks of sinners.¹ Be this as it may, a person who could say with apparent simplicity that, 'at the age of three I began to refuse the good God nothing',² would have a strange idea of God if she really expected to be judged reprobate. We know Thérèse saw God as at least as loving, even indulgently so, as her tenderly doting father, Louis Martin; indeed her faith taught her to see all expressions of love and goodness as but dim reflections of God's all-surpassing perfection. Yet when finally face to face with imminent death, she too had to learn by experience that the all-merciful One transcended all possible categories.

Faith had such a vividly radiant quality for Thérèse that, as she said herself,

I was unable to believe there were really impious people who had no faith. I believed they were actually speaking against their own inner convictions when they denied the existence of heaven, that beautiful heaven where God Himself wanted to be their Eternal Reward.³

As the darkness closed around her, she had to adjust her thinking. She held, as every believer does, that God is Truth itself, and so for Thérèse, who claimed she 'could nourish herself on nothing but truth',⁴ unbelief was an unimaginably deprived state.

It seems to me that the darkness, borrowing the voice of sinners, says mockingly to me: 'You are dreaming about the light, about a fatherland embalmed in the sweetest perfumes; you are dreaming about the eternal possession of the Creator of all these marvels; you believe that one day you will walk out of this fog which surrounds you! Advance, advance; rejoice in death which will give you not what you hope for but a night still more profound, the night of nothingness.'⁵

Accustomed as she was to seeing everything as a gift of God's providence, she had to work out a new mental strategy that would

enable her to cope with this reversal of all she had come to expect. She took heart at the memory that 'Our Lord died on the cross in agony, and yet this is the most beautiful death of love'.⁶ Desolation would not be the last word. So despite her chilling sense of solitude, she clung to the memory that God her loving Father had always cared for her, therefore her blind faith told her 'this too was grace'.

At the canonical examination preceding her profession, Thérèse stated that she had come to Carmel 'to save souls and especially to pray for priests'.⁷ This programme placed her squarely in the mainstream of Carmelite life as envisioned by St Teresa of Avila. In the latter's writings it is set out very clearly what she understood to be the motivation informing her desire to establish new convents. There 'good friends' of the Lord were to give their lives for:

the defenders of the Church and for preachers and learned men who defend her from attack . . . my heart breaks to see how many souls are lost . . . O my sisters in Christ, help me to beg these things from the Lord. This is why He has gathered you together here. This is your vocation.⁸

Each walks his or her personal way, but because of her remarkable fidelity in the living of her religious vocation, Thérèse's trajectory can provide a kind of generalized paradigm for those who are called to follow with her in the same tradition.

This Carmelite tradition is largely characterized by a spirituality of the desert. Elijah, one of its major inspirational figures, left to it not only his virtual war cry, 'With zeal am I zealous for the Lord God of hosts' (1 Kg 19:14) as its motto, but also his uncompromising, not to say austere, singlemindedness when it came to what pertained to God. He 'arose like a fire' (Sir 48:1), it is true, but he also knew the dark land of apparent divine abandonment we refer to as the trial of faith. Contemplative life demands this progression from the sensible, by way of the darkness of the cross, into the transcending light of a purified faith that it was St John of the Cross' genius to map. The Carmelite of today then, like that of any day, when called to let go of all that naturally props up a sense of certainty, can hardly help but experience something of the mindset of those to whom final reality seems to be a closed book. God is ultimate Mystery in the face of whom we choose either life or death. But how imperceptibly subtle that border which must be crossed in trust can seem!

Thérèse did not choose to sit at the table of sinners – in the context, she has mainly unbelievers in mind – but she quite suddenly and oh, so

unexpectedly, simply found herself there. Nonetheless, this experience of shared dereliction with those who have no hope is the logical crowning of her childhood's 'I choose all'.⁹ She who wanted to go all the way in love was taken at her word.

Being a child of her time, Thérèse's language can be a little disconcerting to late twentieth-century ears, but there is no mistaking the passion with which the fourteen-year-old set about 'saving souls' of whom her 'first born' was the hapless Pranzini. 'I felt myself consumed with a thirst for souls . . . I burned with the desire to snatch them from the eternal flames.' Inspired by the searing 'I thirst' of Christ, the 'little' Thérèse almost instinctively goes forward to meet something of the unimagined depths of suffering that marked firstly the one who 'leads us in our faith' (Heb 12:2) and then all those he calls to share the cross he carried for sinners, believers and unbelievers alike. 'Suffering opened wide its arms to me and I threw myself into them with love.'¹⁰

Few of us start out with Thérèse's burning love or singleness of purpose and Thérèse herself would be the first to assure us that the point is irrelevant. However, when a person makes a commitment by vow to follow Christ more closely it is, hopefully, in view of a closer conformity to his person which includes his whole mindset. This knowledge of the mind of Christ, that we are all required to assume, can only be acquired where Thérèse herself continually deepened and enriched her insights. Though the religious practice of her day allowed her only limited access to Scripture, and the rich mine of scripture scholarship we take so much for granted was almost entirely lacking to the world she knew, her gift of concentration on, and contemplation of, the word of God to her personally was among her greatest assets. Here she found the solid foundation on which she based her faith in the all-encompassing will of God to mercy. Here too, love, which had become the *raison d'être* of her being, found its justification in the words of the twelfth and thirteenth chapters of the First Epistle to the Corinthians. 'O Jesus, my love . . . my vocation, at last I have found it . . . My vocation is love.'¹¹

The Prologue to the Carmelite Rule lays down that 'everyone should live a life of allegiance to Jesus Christ . . . he [the person seeking to follow this way of life] must be unswerving in the service of his master'. So we can take it that the Carmelite vocation, like any other form of religious life, is primarily a call to closer adherence to Christ. The particular emphasis the Order has developed from its origin in the solitudes of Mt Carmel is that it is especially devoted to fostering an ever deeper participation in the prayer of Jesus. This gift of the Spirit

can scarcely be mentioned without reference to the Order's great model and patroness, Mary, who, as the first and closest of Christ's followers, is the one who most perfectly hears the word of God and keeps it (Lk 11:28). For the Carmelite, as for Thérèse, the words of prayer the evangelists set down as the Lord's own, and the hints we are given as to Jesus' propensity for silent, solitary prayer, are a precious way of entering into his life of union with the Father.

For Jesus, who always does 'what is pleasing to him' (Jn 8:29), life flows naturally out of this communion with the Father: 'The Father and I are one' (Jn 10:30). The scarcely interrupted contemplative gaze that Thérèse had steadfastly maintained more or less from her childhood had made this 'to please him' the leitmotif of everything she was and did. Moreover Thérèse moulded her life on all that is of Jesus to such an extent that his attitudes became her mental atmosphere. Jesus shows the Father welcoming back the prodigal son, accepting the loving veneration of the Magdalen, promising an unconditional paradise to the crucified thief. The one she loves more than life, than her very self, thinks and acts this way; how could she act differently? Accepting her place at the table of sinners, the place where Jesus sits, is simply what a lover does.

This desire for closer and closer companionship with Christ who opts to love 'to the end' (Jn 13:1) is reflected in her attraction to the Holy Face (it is often forgotten that Thérèse requested and received permission to add this title to her name when she received the habit). The words of Isaiah which fed her devotion to the derided, hidden rejected face of him who was 'crushed for our iniquities' that by his wounds we might be healed (Isai 53:5), formed, so Thérèse herself tells us, 'the foundation of all my piety'.¹² The final seal on her fidelity in love is, then, her participation in the dark abandonment that was Jesus' experience on the cross. During the last months of her life, the 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' (Mk 15:34) resonated hollowly in the empty spaces of her heart. In that paralysing agony of darkness where Christ was left to face the night alone, Thérèse too learned something of what it was to have to confront the spectre of the dark abyss of total annihilation. For an unbeliever facing his or her mortality is not this the final outcome?

Does it come more naturally to us to understand the mindset of unbelievers than it would have been had we lived in the closing years of the nineteenth century? I think the answer would have to be yes. Undercurrents of restlessness were stirring the Europe of Thérèse's day, but the provincial town that was her home was hardly a melting

pot for brave new ideas. Also, Thérèse's contact with anything that might have too greatly challenged her faith was further filtered through the protective medium of her father and other significant adults. For example, we learn that she and her sisters were not allowed to read the newspapers. Céline was eighteen at the time! This excessively insulated mental environment notwithstanding, Thérèse and her family revealed an impressive compassion for the needy they encountered, whatever the particular area of indigence. Praying for 'sinners' was part of life and practical charity was gladly given whenever the Martins discovered they could help. This then was definitely a world where spiritual values were allowed more ample room, even to the extent that, in a household like that of the Martins, they could take absolute priority.

On the other hand, the public face of our society certainly justifies the impression that unbelief is the accepted social norm today. The extraordinary influence of an increasingly invasive media and the immediacy of exposure to world events it provides, means that people generally have a sense of involvement inconceivable before the advent of the ubiquitous (at least in the western world) television set. World problems on an unprecedented scale are the stuff of at times downright laconic public discussion. Our living rooms witness scenes of violence, victimization and cruelty simply as segments of news bulletins. We learn so facilely of suffering resulting from famine, war and disease, undergone by numbers past our comprehending. And these are only the physical images. What of the widespread incidence of depression that statistics tell us is tending towards epidemic proportions and desperate enough to drive some to the ultimate despair of life, suicide?

One positive result could be that there has been what might be called a certain democratization of social responsibility. Everyone has some idea, albeit, as often as not, conditioned by some vested interest or another, of what is going on, and most have an opinion. Nonetheless, there is also widespread evidence of a certain desensitization to the anguish of the many, and despite the numerous instances of true, even heroic, altruism on the part of certain individuals, one does wonder if charity on a one to one basis is in any better shape than in previous generations. In addition, the virtually total lack of a faith dimension to the constant information flow demands that a person look elsewhere to find any meaning deeper than the secular. This subtle undermining of the transcendent is furthered by a vigorous promotion, for whatever reason, of the pleasure ethic. Is this, perhaps, the last resort of a people to whom an all-pervasive materialism closes off the pathways to hope?

In this milieu, the idea of suffering freely undertaken for the good of another, particularly an unknown other, would tend to meet with astonished incomprehension.

This is a world where the Christian concept of forgiveness has also taken a considerable bruising, but one to which Christ's words of healing are still spoken. We all sense intuitively that the way to peace and psychological health lies along the often very difficult road of forgiveness. What is not always so obvious is that the process of forgiveness and Jesus' requirement: 'Do not judge and you will not be judged' (Mt 7:1), are very closely bound up together. To forgive is to set our sister or brother free from our judgement. We hand them over to the all-merciful judgement of God, thereby releasing them from the constriction of our too limited compassion. In doing this, the person one is most fully liberating is, of course, oneself. Here too Thérèse shows remarkable insight. Speaking, as she says, of 'her adventures in the groves of Carmel',¹³ Thérèse describes the experiences that brought her not only to an ever-widening breadth of compassion, but also to a clear grasp of the futility of human judgement, incapable in great part of any certainty as to another's motivation; and who is in any position to say exactly how God evaluates faith and unbelief? In the light of God's unflawed integrity any judgement that differentiates between greater and lesser sinners shrinks to insignificance. No wonder the saints, Thérèse included, grew to see that, before God, the judgement of the relative sinfulness of a person is not only supreme presumption and against the evangelical proscription, but also complete absurdity. In God's eyes, arguably the only eyes that see with absolute clarity, men and women are simply brothers and sisters in debt both to God and to one another.

Thérèse, like Jesus in his 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do' (Lk 23:34), is together with him, unquestioningly on the side of sinners.

Your child, however, O Lord, has understood Your divine light, and she begs pardon for her brothers. She is resigned to eat the bread of sorrow as long as you desire it; she does not wish to rise up from this table filled with bitterness at which poor sinners are eating until the day set by You. Can she not say in her name and in the name of her brothers, 'Have pity on us, O Lord, for we are poor sinners!' Oh! Lord, send us away justified. May all those who are not enlightened by the bright flame of faith one day see it shine. O Jesus! if it is needful that the table soiled by them be purified by a soul that loves You, then I desire to eat this bread of trial at this table until it pleases You to bring me into Your bright Kingdom.¹⁴

It was during the long days that saw Thérèse's progressive physical disintegration under the onslaught of fatal disease, combined with her experience of the eclipse of all perceptible sense of hope, that love reached its zenith. 'O Luminous Beacon of love, I know how to reach You, I have found the secret of possessing Your flame.'¹⁵ Having offered herself to Mercy she knew it was not for herself alone. That we feed, clothe, heal and comfort our needy sisters and brothers is made the touchstone of our love of God. 'Whatever you did to the least of my brethren you did to me' (Mk 25:40), and who more needy than the person bereft of the hope that only comes through faith? The young Carmelite had received great insights on the meaning of Jesus' new commandment that demands the demolition of any reservations in our self-giving. The measure, 'Love one another as I have loved you' (Jn 15:12), has been lifted out of the natural plane into that of pure grace. Bound to one another by the same bonds that unite us to Christ, we now know we are mutually responsible for one another. The final stage in this self-giving is only realized in our identification with the crucified Christ, where we discover that, wounded in ourselves and in our brothers and sisters, we are called to fill up what is wanting to his redemptive suffering (Col 1:24), so much so, that we begin to grasp that until all are together healed, no one is ever completely so.

In earlier days of pain, Thérèse had written to Céline, 'Don't let us waste the trial Jesus sends us. It is a gold mine we must exploit.'¹⁶ Now brought to a new empathy with unbelievers by the enervating dullness of her sense of spiritual paralysis, the response was an almost reflex action. She had tasted just how difficult, rather, impossible it could be to bring oneself to trust, to know, much less accept, that there was something, let alone Someone, beyond the limits of empirical sight. A follower of St John of the Cross (his works, so she tells us, were her whole spiritual nourishment through the ages of seventeen and eighteen¹⁷) could come to only one conclusion: this was the hour to stand firm. She felt instinctively that the love and mercy she had desired for herself, Jesus desired even more greatly to give, not only to her but, through her trusting fidelity, also to her unbelieving sisters and brothers. In Jesus who is the yes to all the promises God has made (2 Cor 1:20), her 'little' yes was her love's affirmation that these promises of God are indeed light that shines for us beyond all our inadequacies; a light that our weakness does not overcome.

We are called like Thérèse to rediscover the true face of the God of Jesus, the one who comes to seat himself not only with, but in the place of sinners. There at this table, privileged by his presence, we too will

find this God, whose other name is Mercy, when we are at last capable of humbly looking our brother or sister in the face. There in those eyes, often so deeply clouded by loneliness, rejection, confusion and pain, we will finally recognize the presence of the desolate crucified One who has always been seeking us.

NOTES

¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Two sisters in the spirit* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), pp 104–106.

² John Clarke (trans), *St Thérèse of Lisieux: her last conversations* (Washington DC: ICS, 1977), p 281.

³ John Clarke (trans), *Story of a soul: the autobiography of St Thérèse of Lisieux* (Washington DC: ICS, second edition, 1976), p 211.

⁴ *Last conversations*, p 134.

⁵ *Story of a soul*, p 213.

⁶ *Last conversations*, p 73.

⁷ *Story of a soul*, p 149.

⁸ St Teresa of Avila, *Collected works* vol II (Washington DC: ICS, 1980), p 42.

⁹ *Story of a soul*, p 27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 149.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 194.

¹² *Last conversations*, p 135.

¹³ *Story of a soul*, p 228.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p 212.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p 195.

¹⁶ John Clarke (trans), *Letters of St Thérèse of Lisieux vol I (1877–1890)* (Washington DC: ICS, 1982), p 537.

¹⁷ *Story of a soul*, p 179.