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St. Thérèse's Little Way of Nonviolence

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

"When I sit in jail thinking of war and peace and the problem of human freedom," Dorothy Day once wrote, "of jails, drug addiction, prostitution and the apathy of great masses of people who believe that nothing can be done--when I thought of these things I was all the more confirmed in my faith in the little way of St. Thérèse. We do the things that come to hand, we pray our prayers and beg also for an increase of faith--and God will do the rest."



Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Edith Stein, Mother Teresa and millions of

others have pondered Thérèse's life and her ordinary witness of extraordinary love. Some dismiss her as a

saccharine neurotic, but anyone who tries to practice her spirituality of sacrificial love quickly realizes how hard it is, how strong she was, and how transforming her personal nonviolence can be for all of us. As we celebrate her feast on October 1st, we do well to learn again from her how to practice interpersonal nonviolence.

Thérèse Martin was born on January 2, 1873, to a middle-class family in Lisieux, Normandy, France. In 1889, at the age of 15, she entered the cloistered Carmelite convent, like her older sisters, and took the name, "Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face." She became the de facto mistress of novices, then contracted tuberculosis and died at age 24, on Sept. 30, 1897, uttering the simple words, "My God, I love you."

Her death was unknown to the world except for the handful of nuns and relatives who knew her. She was considered a sweet, pious young nun. But when her autobiography, *Story of a Soul*, was published the following year, this young nun who never left the cloister exploded upon the Church. Within a few decades, she was canonized, celebrated as patron of France along with Joan of Arc, and eventually named a Doctor of the Church. Today she is regarded as one of the most beloved saints of all time.

Thérèse appeared to live an ordinary life, but appearances can be deceptive. Life in a monastery is difficult. She dedicated herself to the daily practice of sacrificial love toward those around her, perfecting the art of responding to coldness, rudeness, gossip, and insults with active loving kindness and inner compassion. She aimed these small acts of unconditional love at Christ in the other person and for the redemption of the human race--a spirituality she called her "little way." She wanted to remain like a child, as Jesus instructed when he said that we must become like children if we want to enter the reign of God. She understood this spirituality not as childishness, but as a profound trust in God through confidence in God's love, not just despite our littleness, poverty, weakness and brokenness, but precisely because of them.

Thérèse practiced a profound Carmelite spirituality of desert poverty and sacrifice, but her primary focus was love: sharing the unconditional, nonviolent love of Jesus himself. "Jesus, I ask You for nothing but peace, and also love, infinite love without any limits other than Yourself, love which is no longer I but you," she prayed on the day of her profession of vows.

"My vocation is love!" she wrote toward the end of her life. While the Church around her was growing cold with power, rules, regulations, indulgences, punishment and domination, she was determined to be "love in the heart of the Church." Her mission was "to make Love loved," "to work for Your Love alone, with the one purpose of pleasing you, consoling Your Sacred Heart, and saving souls who will love You eternally."

Thérèse wanted to obey Jesus' commandment to love others as he loved, to love even one's enemies, but in the Carmel, as she wrote, there are no enemies, but there are plenty of negative feelings toward others. There were many nuns whom she did not like, who offended her in small, petty ways, so she set about loving them as if it were a matter of life or death, no matter how small-minded, hostile, or cruel they could be. In June 1895, she formalized this commitment to active nonviolent love with a solemn prayer of oblation to God's merciful love. She would love everyone by allowing the love of Christ to consume her, share God's love with her sisters and become a martyr of God's love. Many look upon such an oblation as typical nineteenth-century French piety, but I believe such steadfast love, united to Christ for the salvation of humanity, has the power to disarm the world.

Dorothy Day concluded her biography of Thérèse by comparing the power of Thérèse's Little Way with the atomic bomb. "Is the atom a small thing? And yet what havoc it has wrought. Is her 'Little Way' a small contribution to the life of the Spirit? It has all the power of the Spirit of Christianity behind it. It is

an explosive force that can transform our lives and the life of the world, once put into effect." According to Thérèse of Lisieux and Dorothy Day of New York, the smallest act of willing love, united to the God of love, is more powerful than the atomic bomb itself, more explosive than a nuclear weapon. It is a spiritual explosion of love that disarms, heals, transforms, and reconciles.

Given our culture of violence and the world's wars, I prefer to translate Thérèse's spirituality as "the little way of nonviolence." Through these small acts of great love, we root out every trace of violence within us, allow God to disarm our hearts, and share in God's disarmament of the world. As more and more people practice this little way of nonviolence, love becomes contagious, wars end, and weapons are dismantled. As we organize our nonviolent love into direct public action, as Dorothy Day did, we can end nuclear air raid drills--and someday, nuclear weapons themselves.

This little way of nonviolence is revolutionary for it demands steadfast inner determination to confront the selfishness and violence within us, to open our hearts to be consumed by God's love, and to overwhelm those we do not like with good deeds, kindness, and loving service. Her example of taking the tough Sister St. Peter around in her wheelchair, preparing her food, and responding to her snappy remarks with a pleasant smile models interpersonal nonviolence for us.

Thérèse also exemplifies nonviolence toward ourselves. She refused to hate herself, put herself down or fall into despair because of her own weaknesses and faults. Instead, she loved herself and practice nonviolence toward herself. "If you are willing to bear serenely the trial of being displeasing to yourself," she wrote her sister, "then you will be for Jesus a pleasant place of shelter."

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Thérèse wanted it all--to be a martyr, an apostle, a doctor, even a priest, but especially a saint. Confessing such desires in her day of internal repression, especially among women, on one hand, and Jansenism on the other, was a radical act. "What pleases God is that God sees me loving my littleness and my poverty, the blind hope that I have in God's mercy," Thérèse wrote. "You can never have too much confidence in God, who is so powerful and so merciful. You receive from God as much as you hope for."

Thérèse's journey to holiness and active love inspires millions, but what is so intriguing about her life is that at the height of her devotion, Thérèse was plunged into a long night of disbelief. For the last 18 months of her life, beginning on Easter Sunday itself, she lived through what she called "thick darkness," a "night of nothingness," where she was tempted over and over again to blaspheme God. As she suffered through the horrific physical pain of her final months, her heart widened to embrace all people everywhere, even unbelievers and atheists, with a profound compassion, though she herself had lost a sense of the presence of God.

"After my death I will let fall a shower of roses," she wrote. "I will spend my heaven doing good upon earth." She inspires us, I suggest, to do good on earth too, here and now.

As we ponder her life and death?and our own?and continue to oppose Obama's war on Afghanistan and U.S. imperialism, corporate greed and nuclear weapons, we too are learning, with Dorothy Day, St. Thérèse's little way of nonviolence as the best way forward, especially for churchworkers and activists in a dark time.

This reflection is taken from John's book *You Will Be My Witnesses* (Orbis Books). John recommends *Everything Is Grace: The Life and Way of Thérèse of Lisieux* by Joseph Schmidt, as the best book ever written about St. Thérèse. This week, John will speak at St. Louis University during their week-long activities to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador, as well as at Ohio Dominican University and St. Norbert's in Wisconsin. His latest books, *A Persistent Peace and Put Down the Sword*, along with Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace* are available from www.amazon.com. For further information, see: www.johndear.org.

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