

MAŁGORZATA WIERTLEWSKA  
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## The Church within Me. The Science of Love according to St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus

Kościół we mnie. Nauka miłości według św. Teresy od Dzieciątka Jezus

St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face is the youngest doctor of the Church both in terms of age (died at the age of 24), and being a quite recently proclaimed one (1997). For these as well as other reasons (a woman, a contemplative) it is worthwhile to examine, if only as a preliminary approximation, her spiritual experience and its accompanying insights on the Church as a community of faith in the redeeming God, a community embraced by the believer as the quintessence of his or her inmost self. The task might be especially rewarding for a theologian, since *when the Magisterium proclaims someone a doctor of the Church, it intends to point out to all the faithful, particularly to those who perform in the Church the fundamental service of preaching or who undertake the delicate task of theological teaching and research, that the doctrine professed and proclaimed by a certain person can be a reference point, not only because it conforms to revealed truth, but also because it sheds new light on the mysteries of the faith, a deeper understanding of Christ's mystery.*<sup>1</sup> In compliance with the above, the question that I seek to answer is: What light does the doctrine of St. Thérèse expressed in *The Story of a Soul* shed on our understanding of the Church as Christ's mystery?

St. Thérèse developed a principle of living one's relationship with God based on complete and unconditioned trust in His love which she called the Little Way. Its pivotal point is to allow God, by the consent of one's will, to work in one's life the full measure of goodness that one is capable of. In His omniscience God knows what shape of one's life is most beneficial in the all-comprising Provi-

<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Proclamation of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face as a "Doctor of the Church"*, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/homilies/1997/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19101997\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/1997/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19101997_en.html); [retrieved on 15.09.2012].

dence. Therefore, we can be certain that by allowing our lives to be governed by divine will we shall lead a life that we can truly identify with and recognize as our own throughout, because it comes from Him, who knows us more intimately than we can know ourselves. Formulating it as a negative principle, the Little Way means not putting any obstacle to the graces God communicates to one. Thus, when followed consistently, it breaks down the dividing wall between self-reliance and reliance on God in the pursuit of fulfillment, because one's personal capacities are discovered and cultivated in an unreserved submission of one's will to the will of God as the Father, on trust that every event can become an occasion to bring one closer to God which simultaneously means closer to oneself and the circumstances of one's life. The Little Way is a path of self-development through exercising freedom that takes off from affirmation of oneself as a child of God and proceeds to the affirmation of God as the Father of all people. God Himself is the wellspring of integrity that one finds at the very core of one's selfhood to draw upon in taking on obligations and responsibility for others as well as to grapple with inner and outer adversities. Discovering God in the depth of one's conscience as a personal ground of being is experienced in a twofold way: as self-acceptance and as freedom from oneself, in the sense of not being bound in self-assessment by one's expectations or the notions other people might have concerning what counts as a successful or unsuccessful life. Practicing unimpeded, childlike reliance on God is then the unifying principle that enables a structured life concordant with what one professes to believe. It is the straightforwardness with which Thérèse gives testimony to God's active presence in her life that makes her spiritual autobiography such an accessible and persuading reading.

## I. THE CHURCH AS GOD'S FAMILY

In *The Story of a Soul* we can distinguish three major aspects of divine filiation: (1) spontaneous childlike relationship to God the Father; (2) maturity in uniting one's will with the will of the Father through love of Christ; (3) persistent trust in God's love against personal experience of insurmountable trials of faith, the *dark night of the soul*. Those three aspects can also be regarded as subsequent stages of Thérèse's growing awareness of the dignity involved in being grafted onto Christ in baptism and can be said to correspond to the stages of her life, which can with some approximation be labeled as being a child, learning to be a child and being like a child.

Her spontaneous childlike relationship to God the Father is a natural continuation of the attitude cultivated in the Martin family, which as a "home Church" was a life promoting milieu where receptiveness in discovering God's will for one's life and then aspiring towards its fulfillment were matters of primary im-

portance. Perceiving oneself as a child of God was in line with being a child in the family, encouraged and supported by its elder and more experienced members and oriented towards seeking that place in the world where one could make a gift of one's life to others and thereby discover one's true self. By accepting a state of self-insufficiency one opens onto assistance and instruction from others, weaving a web of reliable interactions that create a community with a potential for infinite expansion. Inherent in this attitude is such an upbringing that instills in the child the desire to experience the generosity and creative power of love as a parent. In her monastic life Thérèse saw herself as a mother responsible for the eternal life of those souls that according to her inner discernment God had entrusted to her charge.<sup>2</sup> This from her early age included grave sinners, i.e. people who on account of transgression against the dictates of their conscience found themselves hindered or even unable to love God. By performing everyday chores with the intention of making it up to Jesus for the deficiency of love in such persons, and by offering prayers for them Thérèse helped them overcome their captivation by sin. Later on, another category of persons was especially included in her practice of mission by doing all things with the right intention, viz. priests. The juxtaposition of great sinners and priests might seem astonishing at first sight, but both groups are representative of the community of the Church, and do not exclude each other. In fact, everyone in the Church is a sinner redeemed by Christ, and priests are those who by celebrating sacraments, especially the Eucharist, build the visible Church of those who have been set free by receiving salvation in Christ. Thérèse learned by experience that even a minor act done for the love of God brings more good to the Church than any great works performed without this personal relationship with Christ. She could also see that God's grace was operative in inspiring confidence in Him in the souls to which she had dedicated her life of monastic discipline.

Maturity in uniting one's will with the will of God the Father is achieved by imitation of Christ in his submission to the Father in the prayer at Gethsemane. This is an attitude that requires genuine courage, because the future that opens before one is not unknown and thus cannot be made to look encouraging. The state of mind that is meant here consists in being fully aware of the suffering and peril that lie ahead, but consenting to accept them against all natural inclinations. As Thérèse puts it, you practice true courage when in the agony of the heart you want to take on the perils and at the same time push them away. The decision to accept the oncoming affliction is possible when one knows this is the price that

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<sup>2</sup> Karol Wojtyła, the later pope John Paul II in his book *Miłość i odpowiedzialność* (*Fruitful and Responsible Love*), Lublin 1960, says that on the spirituals level fatherhood and motherhood do not differ in a significant way. Thus, spiritual parenthood is a gift that enables us to be co-workers of God the Father. And since human beings have spiritual souls, parenthood always involves giving spiritual life to other persons, enlivening them with what one lives by.

must be paid for the salvation of souls. It is a decision made before God out of love for Christ, and not in order to win self-esteem or to be admired by others. Self-denial expands the boundaries of personal freedom and teaches self-responsibility. The suffering or varying degrees of pain connected with deprivation that is inherent in sacrifice is like a crevice through which God can enter and begin to work in our lives, thus becoming visible to others. Therefore, self-sacrifice always means participating to some extent in Christ's kenosis on the Cross.

In this connection Thérèse reflects on two passages from the Gospel: Jesus on the Cross uttering the words *I thirst*, and Jesus at the well asking the Samaritan woman *Give me to drink*, and in both cases she is deeply touched by the fact that God implores His creatures to ease his craving, surrendering Himself to their mercy. The physical thirst is a sign and metaphor of Christ's thirst for souls, his yearning for their love. Thérèse responds with what she calls an exchange of love, in return for God's love extended to her in Christ, she wants to bring others to Christ, just like the Samaritan woman, that they too might find the truth about their lives and the joy of being loved by God. *God did not disdain to beg a little water from the Samaritan woman. He was athirst, but when He said: "Give me to drink", He, the Creator of the Universe, asked for the love of His creature. He thirsted for love. And this thirst of Our Divine Lord was ever on the increase. Amongst the disciples of the world, He meets with nothing but indifference and ingratitude, and alas! Among His own, how few hearts surrender themselves without reserve to the infinite tenderness of His Love.*<sup>3</sup> Let us note a continuation of this discernment in the work of Mother Theresa of Calcutta with her indiscriminating universality of Christ-centred ministry in the midst of the Hindu community and elsewhere. Mother Theresa brought out the intuitions embedded in the spiritual experience of Thérèse of Lisieux and lived them by bringing love to the destitute and asking other destitute, e.g. prisoners, to pray for her congregation and those in its care. In the chapels of the Missionaries of Charity there is always a cross with an inscription *I thirst* underneath. The complementary vocations of those two women have given the Church a new likeness to Christ.

Another image that Thérèse uses in order to expound the universality of Christ's salvation in the Church's mission is that of a lamp that is lit and set on

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<sup>3</sup> Saint Thérèse de Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul (L'Histoire d'une Ame): The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*; trans. T.N. Taylor; Chapter V: *Vocation of Thérèse*; <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/therese/autobio.html>; [retrieved on 15 Sept. 2012].

*Manuscrit B Folio I Verso: Dieu qui déclare n'avoir pas besoin de nous dire s'il a faim, n'a pas craint de "mendier" un peu d'eau à la Samaritaine. Il avait soif... Mais en disant: "donne moi à boire". C'était "l'amour" de sa pauvre créature que le Créateur de l'univers réclamait. Il avait soif d'amour... Ah! je le sens plus que jamais Jésus est "altéré", Il ne rencontre que des ingrats et des indifférents parmi les disciples du monde et parmi ses "disciples à lui", il trouve, hélas! peu de cœurs qui se livrent à lui sans réserve, qui comprennent toute la tendresse de son Amour infini.*

a stand so as to enlighten everyone in the house. She places emphasis on the word “everyone” because it is God’s desire to draw all people to Himself, and there are always more people in the house of God than we can know of or even suppose. To cooperate in the work of salvation one need not be sinless. Jesus does not require moral perfection from us, but trust in him as the one who knows and reveals the truth. The nature of love is submission.

Being like a child in one’s relationship with God also means relentless trust in His love against any personal experience of the “dark night of the soul”. Thérèse teaches that in such circumstances one ought to be guided by two principles: you should never let yourself be discouraged in renewing efforts to carry out the undertaken responsibility in the face of repeated failures, and if you find it impossible to believe in the spiritual reality, even in the existence of God, cling to your yearning for God and all the things He stands for in human life, and induce yourself to love Him if only by the power of your will. As we can see, the second principle is an extreme case of the first. The idea underpinning both is a commonplace observation of a small child who tries to climb a step, and keeps putting up its foot even though the step is too high. Eventually, one of the parents will stoop, pick up the child and carry it upstairs in their arms. All the child must do is just never give up trying.

## II. THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY OF SINNERS JUSTIFIED AND ENTRUSTED TO ONE ANOTHER IN CHRIST

Thérèse considers the problem of sin in the context of God’s forgiving love which wipes away sin and awakens love and gratitude in the one who is forgiven. However, she draws attention to Christ’s words which reveal a peculiar proportionality that the more there is to forgive, the greater the love given in return. Does this mean that those who do not commit grave offences have less reason to love God? On the contrary, as they are the ones whose path God had cleared of rocks against which they might have stumbled. No person should therefore think of themselves as sinless by virtue of their own efforts, but realize that God in His providence has spared them so that they might all the more generously extend His love to their fellow human beings. If the Father did not send the Son to call the just, but the sinners, and the Church is a community of those who have answered Christ’s call, all of them are sinners. In this light the call to sainthood is universal, because human sinfulness is universal. Justification of the sinner is God’s answer to human sin. So, saints are persons who are fully aware of their sinfulness and therefore have been forgiven much more than other sinners, who did not seek forgiveness. As a result of this, those whom we call saints, love God all the more. St. Thérèse expresses this as follows, *He wishes me to love Him,*

*because He has forgiven me, not much, but everything. Without waiting for me to love Him much, as St. Mary Magdalene did, He has made me understand how He has loved me with an ineffable love and forethought, so that now my love may know no bounds.*<sup>4</sup> For Thérèse, Mary Magdalene at the tomb is a paragon of a saint – she stooped so low and persisted in looking at the dark void until she saw two angels who told her of the resurrection.

The driving force of all vocations within the Church is love of Christ, so if one loves Christ, one has a share or in other words has the possibility to contribute to any vocations by engaging in fulfilling one's own vocation with commitment. Whatever one member of the living organism of the Church does affects the whole. And one act of pure love does more for the Church than all external works taken together.

Thérèse insists on one's learning to distinguish between seeking oneself and seeking the will of God, which is always directed towards the good of the other, where following one's natural desires comes into play. Service to others sometimes means being severe where truth is concerned, but we must then not seek for ourselves the good opinion of the one whom we reprove. That is self-love, but love of the other is something different. It is ready for self-denial. However, there is one exception: love of the other cannot lead to the denial of one's bond with Christ and the Church, for that would be deceiving oneself. On the contrary, being steadfast in the obedience of faith to the authority of the Church where we have grown in the love of Christ is a test and measure of our love of others.

### III. THE CHURCH AS A SCHOOL OF LOVE

This aspect of the Church proceeds from the Eucharist, by nature a thanksgiving and an oblation of self-effacing love. The unity of the Last Supper and the Cross which is enacted during every Mass is explained by Jesus himself in the image of the grain of wheat which must fall on the ground and die in order to bear fruit – an image he uses to explain the meaning of his ministry. It is from this Paschal mystery of kenosis that the Church brings forth the power of stirring up the love of God in human hearts, leading them to a response of opening the door of their hearts to Christ, thus allowing him to instruct them through the events of their lives to imitate his humility in doing the will of the Father. There is a picture painted by St.

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<sup>4</sup> Saint Thérèse de Lisieux, *The Story*, Chapter IV: *First Communion and Confirmation*.

*Manuscrit A Folio 39 Recto: Il veut que je l'aime parce qu'il m'a remis, non pas beaucoup, mais tout. Il n'a pas attendu que je l'aime beaucoup comme Ste Madeleine, mais il a voulu que JE SACHE comment il m'avait aimée d'un amour d'ineffable prévoyance, afin que maintenant je l'aime à la folie!...*

Thérèse which illustrates a scene from the Revelation<sup>5</sup> of Jesus knocking on the door of a house that represents the human soul. Jesus is in an attitude of someone humbly imploring to be let in, and characteristically there is no handle on the outside of the door, showing that it can only be opened from within. This simple representation makes a stark point, making us realize that each one is free in choosing how to respond to Jesus' plea to establish an intimate living bond with him, symbolized by the inner decision of taking him home, and that Jesus cannot operate in our lives without the consent of our will, but if invited to enter, he himself will work in us, bringing our potential for love to fulfillment.

This points us to the Eucharistic mystery of transubstantiation which culminates in receiving the Holy Communion, whereby all those who open the doors of their individual lives to Jesus are united in his name as one Church, an assembly of those who have answered his call addressed to each one specifically under his or her own name. Each of the faithful can now be said to reveal Christ to others according to the measure of their readiness to participate in the destiny of the grain of wheat. In fact, there is no other manifestation of the risen Christ acting in the world then the testimony provided by the lives of those who profess faith in him. The Church is therefore a sacrament of Christ's presence in the world, transforming the reality of human lives from within through a love that encompasses all those whose lives are linked together in a natural milieu or by an act of the will of the acting subject followed by intercession for others, an attitude that can expand the capacity of the soul infinitely. Thérèse mentions that she often experienced such an expansion of the heart at prayer. So the Eucharistic nature of the Church is made manifest in the life of those in communion with Jesus, who shares with them all that he has and all those whom he has. That is why, when reflecting upon the correspondence between the growth of love of Christ in her and her growing yearning that he might be loved by each human soul so that each person might experience the tenderness and goodness of his love, to her own surprise she uses the words of Christ's priestly prayer, discovering that with those who love him and receive his sacraments, Jesus authentically shares the fullness of his ministry of salvation.

She writes, *Just as a torrent carries into the depths of the sea all that it meets on its way, so, my Jesus, does the soul who plunges into the shoreless ocean of Thy Love bring with it all its treasures. My treasures are the souls it has pleased Thee to unite with mine; Thou hast confided them to me, and therefore I do not fear to use Thy own words, uttered by Thee on the last night that saw Thee still*

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<sup>5</sup> Rev 3: 29: *Look, I am standing at the door, knocking. If one of you hears me calling and opens the door, I will come to share his meal, side by side with him.* A similar idea linking love, opening the door of one's life to Jesus and the Eucharist is also to be found in Jesus' farewell discourses, Jn 14:32, *If anyone loves me he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make our home with him.*

a traveller on this earth. Here follows Christ's priestly prayer quoted by Thérèse from memory, which shows her freedom and ease in dealing with what belongs to the One she spiritually espoused as a Carmelite nun. The whole passage ends with the statement, *Perhaps it is daring, but, for a long time, hast Thou not allowed me to be daring with Thee? Thou hast said to me, as the Prodigal's father to his elder son: "All I have is thine". And therefore I may use Thy very own words to draw down favours from Our Heavenly Father on all who are dear to me.*<sup>6</sup> The Eucharist becomes an event of communion, a personal union with Christ that can be described in the words of the Chalcedon definition of the two natures, human and divine, which coexist in the one person of the Son of God, *without confusion, change, division, or separation.*<sup>7</sup>

The same intuition of the Church being constituted in the person of Christ by those who are united to him in love and in turn in their own persons bring him the souls of those who remain in a variety of relations to them, is developed by Thérèse in reflection on a verse from the Song of Songs (1:3) *Draw me in your footsteps, we will run.* This is how in terms of day-to-day practice she explains her spiritual experience of living the commandment of the love of God and neighbour in whatever circumstances of life: *By asking to be drawn, we desire an intimate union with the object of our love. If iron and fire were endowed with reason, and the iron could say: "Draw me!" would not that prove its desire to be identified with the fire to the point of sharing its substance? Well, this is precisely my prayer. I asked Jesus to draw me into the fire of his love, and to unite me so closely to himself that he may live and act in me. I feel that the more the fire of love consumes my heart, so much the more shall I say: "Draw me!" and the more also will souls who draw near me run swiftly in the sweet odour of the Beloved. Yes, they will run – we shall all run together, for souls that are on fire can never be at rest.*<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Saint Thérèse de Lisieux, *The Story*, Chapter XI: *A Cantic of Love*.

*Manuscrit C Folio 34 Verso: C'est peut-être de la témérité? Mais non depuis longtemps vous m'avez permis d'être audacieuse avec vous, comme le père de l'enfant prodigue parlant à son fils aîné, vous m'avez dit: "Tout ce qui est à moi est à toi". Vos paroles, ô Jésus, sont donc à moi et je puis m'en servir pour attirer sur les âmes qui me sont unies les faveurs du Père Céleste.*

<sup>7</sup> Council of Chalcedon: Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 302.

<sup>8</sup> Saint Thérèse de Lisieux, *The Story*, Chapter XI: *A Cantic of Love*, *Manuscrit C Folio 35 Verso: Qu'est-ce donc de demander d'être Attiré, sinon de s'unir d'une manière intime à l'objet qui captive le coeur? Si le feu et le fer avaient la raison et que ce dernier disait à l'autre: Attire-moi, ne prouverait-il pas qu'il désire s'identifier au feu de manière qu'il le pénètre [Manuscrit C Folio 36 Recto] et l'imbibe de sa brûlante substance et semble ne faire qu'un avec lui. Mère bien-aimée, voici ma prière, je demande à Jésus de m'attirer dans les flammes de son amour, de m'unir si étroitement Lui, qu'Il vive et agisse en moi. Je sens que plus le feu de l'amour embrasera mon coeur, plus je dirai: Attirez-moi, plus aussi les âmes qui s'approcheront de moi (pauvre petit débris de fer inutile, si je m'éloignais du brasier divin), plus ces âmes courront avec vitesse à l'odeur des parfums de leur Bien-Aimé, car une âme embrasée d'amour ne peut rester inactive...*



The image of iron and fire as a symbol of unitive love between God and the soul – her freely chosen, persistent submission to the divine power within her, to enhance her createdness in the image and likeness of God – has a long standing in Christian mystical literature. It is therefore worthwhile to bring together at this point some of the writings on the soul's progress towards spiritual fruition that use the simile of iron and fire. Let us note the intuitions contained therein on the ecclesiastic dimension of an individual soul that grows in her love of divine love. The relevant sources will be presented here through quotations ordered according to their main themes, so that in effect we can have both an overview of the expressiveness of the simile over time, and a cross-section of the soul experiencing the transformative workings of grace, as a result of which she perceives her own progress as service to the entire community of God's children.

Thus, to start chronologically, St. Macarius the Great (4<sup>th</sup> century) employs the analogy of metal changing its consistency in fire to describe the conversion accomplished by God's love in the soul, whereby she becomes capable of regaining her original, natural disposition of attentiveness to divine will. The soul then wishes to embody the Word of God and in this way receive from the beloved her uncorrupted self. In the third of his *Spiritual Homilies* Macarius writes about this inner transmutation:

*As iron, or lead, or gold, or silver, when cast into the fire is freed from that hard consistency which is natural to it, being changed into softness, and so long as it continues in the fire, is still dissolved from its native hardness – after the same manner the soul that has renounced the world, and fixed its desires only upon the Lord, and has received that heavenly fire of the Godhead, and of the love of the Spirit, is disentangled from all love of the world, and set free from all the corruption of the affections; it turns all things out of itself, and is changed from the hardness of sin, and melted down in a fervent and unspeakable love for that heavenly Bridegroom alone, whom it has received.*<sup>9</sup>

Throwing a bridge across time to span the earliest with the latest author whom I would like to refer to, let us now listen to Bl. Elizabeth of the Trinity, a French Carmelite nun who lived on the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century (1880-1906). In a group of short texts known as her Last Retreat (1906), in *The Seventh Day* she takes up the idea of the soul turning all things out of herself to make room for the Word of God, who *came to bring fire to the earth* (Lk 12:49), *for indeed our God is a consuming fire* (Heb 12:29). Elizabeth shows that the soul's own efforts to conform to the nature of God, whom she recognizes as akin to her

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<sup>9</sup> Macarius the Egyptian, *Spiritual Homilies*, ed. D.R. Jennings, Patristics in English Homepage: [http://www.seanmultimedia.com/Pie\\_Macarius\\_Egyptian\\_Homilies\\_1-5.html](http://www.seanmultimedia.com/Pie_Macarius_Egyptian_Homilies_1-5.html) [retrieved 15.08.2012].

own nature, are a prerequisite of the effectiveness of God's grace, and she likens the ensuing encounter to spiritual espousal:

*[Christ] finds my soul empty of all that is not included in the two words, His love, His glory. He chooses it for his 'wedding canopy'. He rushes in with joy, 'like a strong man running its course' and I cannot 'escape His heat'. This is the consuming fire (Heb 12:29) which will work that blessed transformation spoken of by St. John of the Cross. 'Each of them seems to be the other, and they are both but one': a 'Praise of Glory' of the Father.<sup>10</sup>*

This unitive movement is an endless dialogue of love in our hearts. The self-disclosure of the Beloved awakens in the soul the desire to be like the Beloved up to the point of identity, so that eventually she can say in the words of St. Paul *it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me* (Gal 2:20). Hence the soul's longing to purge the sins she had committed, which become visible in the light of the presence of the Beloved. In Letter 172 Elizabeth explains purgatory not in terms of a just punishment, but as an expression of love on the part of the soul. What she says about the afterlife can certainly also apply to the path of perfection on which the soul embarks already in her earthly life. This is how she puts it: *Perhaps we will see our faults and infidelities, let us abandon them to love which is a consuming fire and thus accomplish our purgatory of love.<sup>11</sup>*

This intuition echoes in the instructions of St. John of Karpathos (7<sup>th</sup> century) written with the aim of encouraging those tempted to abandon the monastic life, so that they may persevere in their ascetic struggles for their own good and for the good of the whole community. The author advocates confidence in divine power, meekness of spirit and submission of the will, using the contrast between the effects of cold and heat on objects subjected to their action, in order to bring into relief the difference in the state of the soul, depending on the decision of her will regarding her sinful condition:

*If a demon has such strength as to force a man, even against his will, to change from his natural state of goodness into a state of sin, how great must be the strength of the angel who at the appointed time is commanded by God to restore that man's whole condition. If the icy blast of the north wind is strong enough to give to water the hardness of rock, what cannot the warmth of the south wind achieve? If extreme cold forces everything to submit to it – for 'who can withstand His cold?' (Ps 147:17) – cannot heat in the same way alter everything? 'Who can abide the burning heat?' (Ecclus. 43:3). So let us confidently believe that the cold, dark coals of our mind will sooner or later blaze with heat and light under the influence of the divine fire.<sup>12</sup>*

<sup>10</sup> E.M.T. Murphy (ed.), *Elizabeth of the Trinity: Always Believe in Love*, New York 2009, p. 144.

<sup>11</sup> Tamže, p. 88.

<sup>12</sup> St. John of Karpathos, *For the Encouragement of the Monks in India who had Written to*

The contention that the soul needs to settle within herself is whether adherence to the divine Beloved jeopardizes her own identity, altering it to the point of annihilation. Richard of St. Victor applies the symbolism of marriage to the process of the soul's perfection of her love, and divides what he calls the *steep stairway of love* into four stages: the betrothal, the marriage, the wedlock, and the fruitfulness of the soul.<sup>13</sup> In his treatise *De Quatuor Gradibus Violentae Charitatis* (Migne, Patrologia Latina cxcvi), he uses the simile of iron and fire to visualize the contrast between the state of a soul that withholds itself from entering the transaction of love for fear of losing her hitherto apparent distinct identity, and that which is not afraid to make the radical decision of submerging herself in divine love, in quest of her fulfillment: *When the soul is plunged in the fire of divine love like iron, it first loses its blackness, and then, growing to white heat, it becomes like unto the fire itself. And lastly, it grows liquid, and losing its nature is transmuted into an utterly different quality of being. As the difference between iron that is cold and iron that is hot, so is the difference between soul and soul: between the tepid soul and the soul made incandescent by divine love.*<sup>14</sup>

For St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the soul's voluntary forgetfulness of her previous state makes her capable of overcoming the limits of her self-contained existence: *And real happiness will come, not in gratifying our desires or in gaining transient pleasures, but in accomplishing God's will for us: even as we pray every day: "Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). [...] As a drop of water poured into wine loses itself, and takes the color and savor of wine; or as a bar of iron, heated red-hot, becomes like fire itself, forgetting its own nature; or as the air, radiant with sun-beams, seems not so much to be illuminated as to be light itself; so in the saints all human affections melt away by some unspeakable transmutation into the will of God.*<sup>15</sup>

Similar insights are to be found in Jakob Boehme, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran mystic: *I give you an earthly similitude of this. Behold a bright flaming piece of iron, which of itself is dark and black, and the fire so penetrateth and shineth through the iron, that it giveth light. Now, the iron doth not cease to be; it is iron still: and the source (or property) of the fire retaineth its own propriety: it doth not take the iron into it, but it penetrateth (and shineth) through the iron; and it*

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*Him: One Hundred Texts*, Text 66; in: *The Philokalia. The Complete Text Compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth*, vol. I, translated from the Greek and edited G.E.H. Palmer, Ph. Sherrard, K. Ware, London 1979, p. 297.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. E. Underhill, *Mysticism. A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, London 2003, p. 165.

<sup>14</sup> Tamže, p. 504.

<sup>15</sup> St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, Chapter 10: *Of the fourth degree of love: wherein man does not even love self save for God's sake*; [http://www.pathsoflove.com/bernard/on-loving-god\\_1a.html](http://www.pathsoflove.com/bernard/on-loving-god_1a.html); [retrieved on 15.09.2012].

*is iron then as well as before, free in itself: and also is the source or property of the fire. In such a manner is the soul set in the Deity; the Deity penetrateth through the soul, and dwelleth in the soul, yet the soul doth not comprehend the Deity, but the Deity comprehendeth the soul, but doth not alter it (from being a soul) but only giveth it the divine source (or property) of the Majesty.*<sup>16</sup>

The issue of the soul's identity is also interestingly taken up by Thomas Aquinas. In his *Summa Theologica*, Question 28 "The effects of love", Article 5 "Whether love is a passion that wounds the lover?". In response to the objection that melting is a kind of dissolution he explains: «*But love melts that in which it is: for it is written: "My soul melted when my beloved spoke" (Song 5:6). Therefore love is a dissolvent: therefore it is a corruptive and a wounding passion, Aquinas asserts: Dionysius says (Div. Nom. iv) that "everything loves itself with a love that holds it together," i.e. that preserves it. Therefore love is not a wounding passion, but rather one that preserves and perfects. And further on in the same section: Now nothing is hurt by being adapted to that which is suitable to it; rather, if possible, it is perfected and bettered. But if a thing be adapted to that which is not suitable to it, it is hurt and made worse thereby. Consequently love of a suitable good perfects and better the lover; but love of a good which is unsuitable to the lover, wounds and worsens him. Wherefore man is perfected and bettered chiefly by the love of God: but is wounded and worsened by the love of sin, according to Hosea 9:10: "They became abominable, as those things which they loved".*<sup>17</sup>

We can therefore conclude that unitive love heightens the soul's self-awareness and endows her with the capacity to recognize her true self. St. Catherine of Siena states it clearly in one of her prayers: *In your nature, eternal Godhead, I shall come to know my nature. And what is my nature, boundless love? It is fire, because you are nothing but a fire of love. And you have given humankind a share in this nature, for by the fire of love you have created us.*<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, and perhaps paradoxically, by abiding in the fire, partaking of it, the soul preserves itself from corruption and dissolution, because God Himself safeguards her from any external dangers. This is how St. Catherine expresses the idea in her dialogues with divine Providence: *These souls, thrown into the furnace of My charity, no part of their will remaining outside but the whole of them being inflamed in Me, are like a brand, wholly consumed in the furnace, so that no one*

<sup>16</sup> Jakob Boehme, *The Threefold Life of Man* (cap. vi. 88); quoted in: E. Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 504.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 28: *The effects of love*, Article 5: *Whether love is a passion that wounds the lover?*; <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2028.htm>; [retrieved on 15.09.2012].

<sup>18</sup> St. Catherine of Siena, *Prayer 12 My Nature is Fire*, in: S. Noffke (trans. and ed.), *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, San Jose 2001.

*can take hold of it to extinguish it, because it has become fire. In the same way no one can seize these souls, or draw them outside of Me, because they are made one thing with Me through grace.*<sup>19</sup>

Now the unitive love becomes fruitive. John Ruysbroeck expounds the fruitive aspect of the soul's union with her divine Beloved in his treatise *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage*. God acts in and through the soul in accordance with her individual capacities and the needs of others to which she can respond in the current circumstances of her life. The active outpouring of the soul's powers is at the same time experienced as her homecoming, her return to the source of her being. The crucial transaction of living energies between God and the soul occurs within the inward man, so it proceeds in an immediate and intimate mode. Ruysbroeck's description parallels St. Thérèse's statement that souls that are on fire can never be at rest, meaning that they can never be barren, futile and inactive, as they are animated by no less than divine love, the essence of God's life: *such a quickened man rises up, with his whole being and all his powers, and joins himself to God with life-giving and active love, then he feels that his love is, in its ground, where it begins and ends, fruitive and without ground. If he then wishes to penetrate further, with his active love into that fruitive love: then, all the powers of his soul must give way, and they must suffer and patiently endure that piercing Truth and Goodness which is God's self. For, as the air is penetrated by the brightness and heat of the sun, and iron is penetrated by fire, so that it works through fire the works of fire, since it burns and shines like the fire, and so likewise it can be said of the air – for, if the air had understanding, it could say: I enlighten and brighten the whole world” – yet each of these keeps its own nature. [...] And therefore we must perpetually turn inwards and be renewed in love, if we would seek out love through love. And this is taught us by St John, where he says: He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God and God in him.*<sup>20</sup>

Let us complete our review of the compelling image of the iron and fire with insights formulated by Bl. Elizabeth of the Trinity, who spells out the soul's participation in the bond of love of the three Divine Persons in terms of her partaking in the salvific ministry of Christ: *O Consuming Fire, Spirit of Love, descend into my soul and make all in me as an incarnation of the Word, that I may be to him a super-added humanity wherein he renews his mystery; and you, O Father, bestow yourself and bend down to your little creature, seeing in her only your*

<sup>19</sup> St. Catherine of Siena, *Dialogo*, cap. lxxviii, quoted in: E. Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 504-505.

<sup>20</sup> John of Ruysbroeck, *The Adornment of Spiritual Marriage*, Chapter VIII: *Showing how the inward man should exercise himself, that he may be united with God without means*; in: idem: *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage, The Sparkling Stone, The Book of Supreme Truth*, trans. from the Flemish G.A. Wynschenk DOM, ed. E. Underhill, Grand Rapids 1916; at: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/ruysbroeck/adornment.html>; [retrieved 15.09.2012].

*beloved Son in whom you are well pleased.*<sup>21</sup> She does not reserve this privilege to herself alone, but sees it as the vocation of the Carmelite, who is called to be a sacrament of Christ to literally the whole world,<sup>22</sup> and this likens her mission to that of the priest: *I like the thought that the life of the priest and the Carmelite is an advent that prepares souls for the Incarnation. David says in one of his psalms: "Fire goes before him" (Ps 97:3). Is not love that fire? And is it not also our mission to prepare the way of the Saviour by our union with Him whom the Apostle calls a consuming fire? By contact with Him, our souls, spread throughout all the members of the Body of Christ, which is the Church. Then we shall console our Master's Heart, and He will be able to show us to His Father, saying: "I am already glorified in them" (Jn 17:10).*<sup>23</sup>

This line of reasoning, to which also St. Thérèse wholly subscribed and by which she lived,<sup>24</sup> corresponds with the interpretation of the famous formula *extra Ecclesiam nullus omnino salvatur* laid down in the Declaration *Dominus Iesus* in a section explaining the nature of the Church as the "universal sacrament of salvation", on the basis of its being always united to Jesus Christ, and in this way establishing an indispensable relationship with the salvation of every human being. Those who are not formally and visibly members of the Church, obtain salvation in Christ by virtue of a grace that has a mysterious relationship to the Church, but does not make them formally part of the Church. The declaration then admits that *With respect to the "way" in which the salvific grace of God – which is always given by means of Christ in the Spirit and has a mysterious relationship to the Church – comes to individual non-Christians, the Second Vatican Council limited itself to the statement that God bestows it "in ways known to himself". Theologians are seeking to understand this question more fully.*<sup>25</sup> We

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<sup>21</sup> Bl. Elizabeth of the Trinity, *Prayer to the Trinity* (21<sup>st</sup> Nov. 1904), Cf. E.M.T. Murphy, *Elizabeth of the Trinity*, p. 130.

<sup>22</sup> In her poem *The Carmelite* (1909), she writes: *A Carmelite, a soul adoring! One/Surrendered to God's action, all, entire;/Whatever comes – in Large Communion,/Her heart uplifted, burning with God's fire!/'The one thing necessary' she has found: /God's Being, Light and Love. She'll intercede –/Her prayer a cloak that wraps the world around:/in that way – an apostle then indeed!* Ibidem, p. 119.

<sup>23</sup> Bl. Elizabeth of the Trinity, *Letter 25* (29<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1905, to Abbé Chevignard), Ibidem, p. 107.

<sup>24</sup> The spiritual affinity of the two Carmelites, particularly their understanding of contemplation as a means of accessing holiness to all, and their corresponding insights of the way of perfection of the soul: the little way of love (Thérèse) and the indwelling of God in the soul (Elizabeth) are presented and discussed in: H.U. von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, D. Nichols, A.E. Nash, D. Martin (trans.), San Francisco 1992.

<sup>25</sup> Declaration "Dominus Iesus" on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church; Part IV: *The Church and the other religions in relation to salvation*; [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000806\\_dominus-iesus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html); [retrieved on 15.09.2012].

can say that St. Thérèse resolved this question in practical terms, reaching profound theological insights by consistently adhering to her Little Way of spiritual childhood.

#### IV. THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY OF CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

*I know and I have experienced that “the Kingdom of God is within us”. Our Lord has no need of books or teachers to instruct our souls. He, the Teacher of Teachers, instructs us without any noise of words. I have never heard Him speak, yet I know He is within me. He is there, always guiding and inspiring me; and just when I need them, lights, hitherto unseen, break in. This is not as a rule during my prayers, but in the midst of my daily duties. Sometimes, however, as this evening, at the close of a meditation spent in utter dryness, a word of comfort is given to me: Here is the Master I give thee, He will teach thee all that thou shouldst do. I wish thee to read in the Book of Life in which is contained the science of love”.*<sup>26</sup> Thérèse also uses the metaphor of a name to indicate one’s most personal and intimate relationship with God which is not transferable, cannot be shared by anyone else and is knowable only to the addressee. The metaphor is taken from Rev 2:17 that those who prove victorious will be given by God a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the man who receives it. We can say that it is the genuine truth about one’s life and one’s specific calling that unfolds along with the course of one’s life and is discovered in inner dialogue with God which is enabled by the spiritual assistance of the community of the faithful.

#### V. BELIEVING IN THE CHURCH AS A VIRTUE

On the pages of her spiritual autobiography Thérèse often speaks of eternity as the authentic dimension of human life. Therefore, thinking about one’s life in terms of unity involves looking at oneself and other persons as empowered with an infinite future. This in turn calls for patience and perseverance in waiting for the desired results of one’s efforts both in dealing with oneself and all the more

<sup>26</sup> Saint Thérèse de Lisieux, *The Story*, Chapter VIII: *Profession of Soeur Thérèse*.

*Manuscrit C Folio 34 Verso: Je comprends et je sais par expérience “Que le royaume de Dieu est au-dedans de nous.” Jésus n’a point besoin de livres ni de docteurs pour instruire les âmes, Lui le Docteur des docteurs, il enseigne sans bruit de paroles ... Jamais je ne l’ai entendu parler, mais je sens qu’Il est en moi, à chaque instant, Il me guide, m’inspire ce que je dois dire ou faire. Je découvre juste au moment où j’en ai besoin des lumières que je n’avais pas encore vues, ce n’est pas le plus souvent pendant mes oraisons qu’elles sont le plus abondantes, c’est plutôt au milieu des occupations de ma journée...*

so in dealing with others. We must not be discouraged by an apparent futility or even failure of endeavors undertaken in good faith in the service of the Church and its universal mission of being a sacrament of salvation in Christ. Human beings are persons endowed with freedom, so their response to the gift of grace is never a predictable automaton but a mystery of someone relating in a new way to his or her life, which the biblical language calls conversion, i.e. turning back to God and this might occur over long periods of time. In this connection Alasdair MacIntyre<sup>27</sup> interestingly points out that there are situations when one recognizes the obligation not to abandon a certain person or a specific cause in spite of hardships, but to abide by them with a patience and forbearance similar to that of God towards His creatures. Such constancy and integrity is only possible when one believes in an overriding purpose of every human life – the joy of being with God. MacIntyre quotes Kierkegaard that purity of heart is to will one thing. Setting this phrase in the context of St. Thérèse's doctrine, this one thing, the salvation of all souls is a concern in which all the baptized are invited to partake by allowing themselves to be animated by the spirit of Christ, thereby working towards the salvation of others in ways known to God.

## CONCLUSION

In the Introduction to the Polish translation of *The Story of a Soul* we can read the following words: *Today even in the Church, and all the more so outside the Church, God seems to many people to be a hidden God, and hence often even an absent God. They are deprived of the joy of which it is said: It is the greatest of joys to know that God exists.*<sup>28</sup> And in the very first pages of St. Thérèse's autobiography we come across a statement that underlies her entire outlook: *God's Love is made manifest as well in a simple soul which does not resist His grace as in one more highly endowed.*<sup>29</sup> If today for so many people God is invisible to the point of nonexistence, is it perhaps not so, because by resisting His grace we Christians prevent Him from making His love manifest in our lives? Since each Christian has the privilege of saying *I have been grafted onto Christ in the sacrament of baptism*, the privilege of imitating Christ is accessible to every Christian. It begins by opening the door of one's heart and life to Christ, and it is a door that can only be opened from within. And now my final conclusion about the nature of the Church derived from the book of life of St. Thérèse of the

<sup>27</sup> A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1984, 2nd edn., Chapter 14: *The Nature of the Virtues*.

<sup>28</sup> Św. Teresa od Dzieciątka Jezus, *Dzieje duszy*, Kraków 1984, p. 28.

<sup>29</sup> Saint Thérèse de Lisieux, *The Story of A Soul*, Prologue *Manuscrit A Folio 2 Verso: J'ai compris encore que l'amour de Notre Seigneur se révèle aussi bien dans l'âme la plus simple qui ne résiste en rien à sa grâce que dans l'âme la plus sublime...*



Child Jesus. The Church is first and foremost an inner act that creates an objective reality – the communion of saints – that is those who have found themselves in God.

### SUMMARY

The article presents insights on the nature of the Church which are to be gained from reading the autobiographical book of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, *The Story of a Soul*. As indicated by the title of the book, the soul is the central personal reality and agency of spiritual transaction. It is within the sphere of the soul that the person first lives the sacramentality of the Church as a source of encounter with God that opens onto the possibility of a relationship of love. Divine love in turn expands the natural capacities of the soul to encompass others, even strangers, in the life of one's soul as a living member of the community of the Church, thus also giving them a share in the spiritual gifts of Christ mediated by the Church. Special attention is paid to the conformity of Thérèse's experience of soul transforming divine love with that of other saints and mystics throughout history, as expressed by the metaphor of iron and fire.

### Key words

St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, *The Story of a Soul*, soul, Church, divine love

### STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł przedstawia intuicje odnoszące się do natury Kościoła, jakie można wyczytać z autobiografii św. Teresy od Dzieciątka Jezus *Dzieje duszy*. Jak wskazuje już tytuł książki, dusza jest centralną osobową rzeczywistością i podmiotem duchowej wymiany. To właśnie w sferze duszy osoba najpierw doświadcza sakramentalności Kościoła jako źródła spotkania z Bogiem, które otwiera możliwość relacji miłości. Boża miłość z kolei rozwija naturalne zdolności duszy do ogarnięcia sobą innych, także tych osobiście nieznanymi, i włączenia ich w wewnętrzne życie duszy jako żywych członków wspólnoty Kościoła, dając im w ten sposób udział w duchowych darach Chrystusa przekazywanych przez Kościół. Autorka skupia szczególną uwagę na wykazaniu zgodności doświadczenia Bożej miłości przez św. Teresę z podobnym doświadczeniem innych świętych i mistyków na przestrzeni dziejów, doświadczenia opisywanego metaforą żelaza i ognia.

### Słowa kluczowe

św. Teresa od Dzieciątka Jezus, *Dzieje duszy*, dusza, Kościół, Boża miłość