

## ST TERESA OF LISIEUX

AND HER 'TRULY EXCESSIVE SENSITIVENESS'

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IN her autobiography, St Teresa of Lisieux has entered accurately, sometimes forcibly, a number of her peculiarities of disposition and character. They are so striking that no attentive reader can miss them. Most of her biographers however explain them away without realizing their true significance or dismiss them as of being of no importance. One well-known Teresian, for instance, speaks of St Teresa's 'truly excessive sensitiveness' and leaves it at that. 'Excessive' is the right word, 'sensitiveness' is not, and we believe that after considering the facts of the case, we shall come to the conclusion that this 'sensitiveness' of St Teresa has a medical signification and deserves another name. Why should we be reticent about any element of her personality? Every saint must build up his sanctity with the materials at hand, with, or in spite of, his temperament and constitution, his physical and mental gifts or deficiencies.

Taken one by one, the idiosyncrasies of St Teresa may seem obscure. Take them together and you soon perceive a logical link between them all. They are in fact extremely important since her personality is inexplicable unless you give them due consideration.

Without entering into many details let us run over some of the peculiarities we have in mind. Teresa tells us that after her mother's death (she was then four and a half) she became a different child, reserved, timid, inclined to weep without any cause, simply perhaps because someone had looked at her. She enjoyed melancholy at six and later on she wrote with evident relish of her moods of poetical (and, as the thought, religious) sadness. Five years later her sister Pauline, who had taken her mother's place, entered Carmel—a loss as unexpected as it was 'far in excess of her strength'. A serious nervous breakdown followed: headaches first, then shiverings, fits of catalepsy, hallucinations, delusions. She thought they were trying to poison her, and in the end failed to recognize her sister Marie who had nursed her for many weeks during her breakdown. The hydropathic treatment and the drugs of Dr Notta had no success and she recovered her health

suddenly through 'a vision'. She saw her statue of the Blessed Virgin in her bedroom come to life and smile to her.

Her propensity to tears continued; her headaches persisted; she was sent to school where she proved an intellectually precocious child, quick of understanding, imaginative and fond of study. She was not, however, a good mixer and could not make friends; during recreation time, instead of joining in the games, she kept away from the other girls, mooning, reading or 'giving honourable burial' to little dead birds. At home, on holidays, she would retire to her room, hide herself behind the curtains of her bed and think of eternity.

When she was about twelve she fell a prey to scruples. This is a state of anxiety which makes the patient worry about absurd trifles and is not amenable to reason since it is a mental trouble. It was a very painful trial and she herself remarked: 'One must have passed through such a martyrdom to be able to understand it!' Teresa says it lasted two years. She thought so, but the advice given her by Père Pichon three years later, in 1888, and that of another confessor, Père Alexis Prou, in 1891 appears to be what a competent confessor would say to a scrupulous patient.

In her autobiography she tells us here and there of black moods, of days of deep distress which have no adequate cause or even no cause at all. A typical example of this can be read in Mgr Thomas Taylor's *Saint Thérèse de Lisieux*, page 96. Her uncle had disagreed with her and thought—very sensibly—that she was too young at fifteen to enter the convent. Read the whole page. . . .

A three days martyrdom . . . lost in a frightful desert . . . stormy waters, darkness, lightning. . . . All round was night, dark night, utter desolation, death!', and she adds that 'the heavens wept with her'.

At Christmas in 1886 occurs what she calls her conversion and she claims that from that day onwards 'the fountain of her tears was dried up'. She certainly began to fight against her propensity to tears, but not always successfully, for we find her weeping copiously on quite a few occasions the following year. For instance when, accompanied by her father, she called on the Bishop of Bayeux, not only did she weep during the interview, but when the Vicar General opened the door to them, he found Teresa in tears on the doorstep. This surely indicates a certain nervous weakness.

Her last and greatest trial was that of religious doubt. During the last fifteen months of her life, and indeed up to her last day on earth, she was haunted by the intolerable fear that God did not love her, that she would never see him, for there was no such place as Heaven, no such thing as an after life. This was not intellectual doubt, for she herself wrote that she could not give any explanation of it; it was an obsession. Like her scruples, like the state of wretchedness she had so often experienced, like her delirious wanderings (the precipice, the threatening black fingers) during her nervous breakdown when she was ten years old, these doubts were a mental disturbance, a nightmare, not a real temptation. Her absolute trust in God, as well as the horror these thoughts inspired her, caused her to reject them with all her will and as she said herself: 'In all my life I have never made so many acts of faith as during these last months.'

Within the limits of an article we cannot enter into any more details. We have directed the reader's attention to enough abnormal characteristics of St Teresa—none of which can be questioned since they rest on her own testimony—for him to draw an obvious conclusion: St Teresa was a 'nervous subject'; she may be called a neuropath; she suffered from psycho-neurosis. It is no disparagement to say this. Most general medical practitioners will agree that seventy-five per cent of their patients are 'nervous' people, suffering from functional diseases, and that most of them are recruited among the highly organized, conscientious people, not among the mental incompetents. St Teresa shared her disability with that section of humanity which has given the world most of its thinkers, artists, poets, musicians and, we can add, many of its saints.

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A careful reading of the *Story of a Soul* reveals the not unexpected conclusion that in fact St Teresa used these peculiarities of temperament as the means to rise to holiness. From December 1888 onwards she fought her propensity to tears, at least in so far as they were a manifestation of selfishness. She fought her scruples and was even under the impression that two years had been enough for her to conquer them. Unlike most victims of scruples who, over-strict in one or two directions, are astonishingly lax in others, we find her in Carmel as strict in observing the

minute rules of the convent as the wider precepts of the Gospel. Her moods of depression were to her a very painful trial and she spoke longingly of heaven 'where there will be no black moods'; yet, unlike the common run of neurotics, who inflict on everyone within reach the tale of their imaginary complaints and the intolerable burden of their melancholy, St Teresa kept an unbroken silence over her mental trials and invariably had a radiant smile for everyone. So much was every one deceived by her cheerful manner that when, a short while before her death, she referred to her past life as one of bitter suffering, no one understood what she meant.

We find her at her greatest during the last year of her life when she was obsessed by religious doubts and 'her mind dwelt in darkness'. The victims of such obsessions as these seem generally to accept them as representing the truth and fail to see them as the nightmare they are. They are incapable of dissociating these phantasms from themselves and lose the power to resist and fight them. Not so St Teresa. Her mind and heart were so firmly anchored in faith and in absolute trust in God that her doubts were never accepted by her. They remained outside her soul, besiegers of a citadel that never opened its gates to them. It seems to us that this long continued fight against doubt did in fact set the final seal on her sanctity and her greatness. In our book, *Two Portraits of St Teresa*, we incorporated this interpretation in the story of her last day on earth.

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We believe it is possible to form a well-founded opinion of the nature of St Teresa's neurosis by an examination of its manifestations as the saint described them in her autobiography. To arrive at the cause, it is often enough to examine the effects. After her mother's death, the character of Teresa underwent a complete change, and surely her new timidity, her easy and frequent tears cannot be interpreted as signs of happiness or holiness, but rather as symptoms of insecurity and fear. After the departure of Pauline, her second mother, to the convent, occurred the illness we have already described. Many of its symptoms have a common character: the precipice by the side of her bed, the conviction she is being poisoned, the threatening black fingers on the wall, etc., clearly indicate a state of fear, a feeling of insecurity. Later on,

when she will not recognize her sister Marie who has tenderly looked after her throughout her illness, what does it mean, except that Marie who has played the part of a mother, is not her mother? She feels herself to be motherless; no one cares for her, no one stands between her and outside dangers. It is only when she knows she need fear no more because the Blessed Virgin has smiled to her and has taken her under her protection, that she recovers. She has at last found security, and she recovers at once.

Her scruples, what are they but another manifestation of that deep-seated fear that was part of herself? Without any cause, she believed that she had offended God deeply, that her soul was in danger; up to the end of her life she needed constant reassurance that God loved her. The only two confessors she approved of and named in her *Story of a Soul*, are those who assured her with great emphasis that all was well with her: 'Before God, the Blessed Virgin, the angels and all the saints, I declare that you have never committed a mortal sin' (Père Pichon); 'On behalf of Almighty God, I assure you he is well pleased with your soul' (Père Prou). For a while, Teresa found peace of mind after these declarations, because their words were the very antidote she needed against fear.

On the other hand, if during a retreat the preacher spoke of the justice and judgments of God, of sin and punishment, and suggested it was possible for a nun to offend God mortally, his sermon left Teresa agitated and perturbed to an extraordinary degree. We have this from her own sister, Pauline, who wrote: 'During one of those retreats I was serving in the refectory and I was struck by the anguished expression on her face. She could not eat. I asked her later on what it was and she confided to me that the discourses of the retreat were the cause of it. I believe she would have died had the retreat lasted much longer.'

Two of the dreams related by St Teresa in her autobiography tell us the same story of fear and need of reassurance. In the first one which occurred soon after the death of Mother Geneviève, foundress of the Carmel of Lisieux, she saw this saintly woman distributing all her belongings to the Sisters. 'When my turn came, her hands were empty, and I feared I was not to receive anything, but she looked at me lovingly and repeated three times: "To you I leave my heart", and thus after all Teresa received the best gift of all.'

The same tale of fear and encouragement is the theme of her second dream. To the three Carmelites who appear to her—one of them the foundress of Carmel in France—Teresa asks the question that was all the time at the back of her mind: Does God want anything more from me? Is he pleased with me? and Mother Anne de Jesus answered: 'God asks nothing more from you; he is pleased, very much pleased.'

By the way, we should note the directness of the dreams of St Teresa. Like the dreams of children, hers contain hardly anything that could be called symbols. One finds in them a direct, and clearly expressed, wish and an equally direct answer.

She was never free from those exaggerated feelings of insecurity even during her last illness, even at the very time when they attribute to her definite pronouncements about her own sanctity and future canonization. To the end she was haunted by terrible doubts about her salvation and about the existence of heaven. One night a few weeks before her death she was seized with a terrible feeling of anguish. She told her sister: 'I was lost in darkness from out of which came an accursed voice. "Are you certain that God loves you? Has he come to tell you so himself? The opinion of a few creatures will not justify you in his sight."' "

These points taken together seem to us conclusive and it would be difficult not to draw the inference that at the root of St Teresa's neurosis is a feeling of insecurity. Can we go further and attempt to reach the earliest cause and beginnings of it? We believe that heredity is often responsible for a natural predisposition to 'nervous' troubles, but do we know enough of St Teresa's ancestry to form a well-founded opinion? It may be also that after spending the first eighteen months of her life in the country under the loving care of a foster-mother whom she had accepted as her real one, her return home was to her like starting a new life among strangers. How did she accept the change? We have it from Mrs Martin that in May and April when Teresa was taken home for her first short visits 'she cried until they thought she would swoon away', and that on each succeeding visit 'she cried and only at the sight of her nurse would she stop and smile'. What were her reactions when finally, after eighteen months, she had to exchange open-air life in the country for the confined rooms of a town house, and her beloved foster-mother for people she no longer knew? How long did it take for her to take root in these new