

1. October 2024

Spiritual childhood

Mt 18:1-5

Gospel on the Feast Day of Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus

At this time the disciples came to Jesus and said, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?' So he called a little child to him whom he set among them. Then he said, 'In truth I tell you, unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven. And so, the one who makes himself as little as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven. Anyone who welcomes one little child like this in my name welcomes me.'

In St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, we meet one of the most lovable saints of recent centuries. Today's gospel, chosen in her memory, corresponds to the spiritual path of this saint. At Christmas 1886, when Thérèse was still a very young girl - barely thirteen years old - she experienced a strong conversion, and from that moment on she wanted nothing more than to love the Lord and people. This desire became her vocation, leading her to Carmel at a very early age.

As a good French woman, her great example to follow was Saint Joan of Arc, who had given her life for God and for France. Unlike this much-loved saint, Thérèse's life was spent in the seclusion of the cloister, but her dedication to God was as unconditional as that of her great model! Thérèse wanted to love Jesus more than He had ever been loved, and to love people as Jesus loved them. This was the fire that burned in her! She lived her dedication to the Lord through the "way of spiritual childhood"; a hidden way, which went unnoticed by almost everyone in the monastery, but which was nevertheless a strong way of holiness.

In the following sentence, St. Thérèse gives us an idea of this "little spiritual way":

"O beloved Jesus! (...) I have no other way of proving my love to You than by throwing flowers; that is, by wasting no small sacrifice, no glance, no word; by paying regard to even the smallest deeds and doing them out of love..."

So, Saint Thérèse did not miss any opportunity to grow in love, and so she left us a path that many people can follow. It is the transformation of everyday life into a "little way", which becomes a "big way". What she experienced in the silence of Carmel can be experienced in the most diverse circumstances of life: from people who are in good health to people who are ill; from housewives and mothers or fathers to teachers....

It is the conscious acceptance of the life situation in which God has placed us, turning it into a constant school of love. Certainly the life of this Carmelite teaches us that such a path is only possible through prayer and the reception of the sacraments. Moreover, Thérèse was aware that it was only in God's grace that she was able to walk it.

She teaches us that the way to great holiness does not necessarily require extraordinary and visible graces and physical martyrdom. Facing the tasks entrusted to us day by day with love, with our eyes fixed on Jesus and on our neighbour, becomes a constant interior formation. Of course, in Carmel there are other particular ways of living the sacrifice, and there are things in this special way of following Christ that remain hidden to us, but the essence of the "little spiritual way" is accessible to all!

St. Thérèse, with all her dedication to the Lord, was named by the Church as "patroness of the missions". With her love, she wanted to conquer the heart of God and lead the whole world to Him. The hidden life of this saint, together with that of so many others, becomes the inner strength of those who have the mission to proclaim the Gospel. Souls like St. Thérèse are those who, like Moses, hold their arms raised high to implore for the People (cf. Ex 17:11-13). May the Holy Spirit resist any attempt to weaken this fire of love in the heart of the Church, which is the contemplative life! At the time of the French Revolution, attempts were made to destroy it, and the same thing happened in other times... The Church of today also needs these hidden vocations: people who withdraw completely from the world and dedicate themselves to prayer. No one should "get their hands in" there, trying to adapt this way of life to the present times, and thus diminishing its essence!

On May 17, 1925, Thérèse of the Child Jesus was canonised by Pope Pius XI. In 1927 she was named patron saint of the missions, together with St. Francis Xavier. And in 1997 Pope John Paul II proclaimed her a Doctor of the Church.